

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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JUMP CUT

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Dodes' Ka-Den Illusions

by Marty Gliserman

from *Jump Cut*, no. 6, 1975, p. 1

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“Hopelessness is a form of silence, of denying the world and fleeing from it.”—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Akira Kurosawa's *DODES' KA-DEN* came to the United States last fall; it is a deceptively beautiful film about life in a Tokyo slum. We watch the evolution of the lives of many small groups within this community in a series of successful cycles. We see a young man who has the illusion/ delusion of running a trolley car, a father and son subsisting on scraps, a small family that makes dolls for a living, etc.. Then each group returns and their stories move forward, or more often, downward.

There are beautiful, often surreal, colors and sets, exquisite faces, gestures and mime. But the beauty, the aesthetic illusion, Kurosawa makes stands in stark contradiction to (and is a defensive barrier against) the poverty and oppression of the people in his film. One could not find a better film for teaching the distinction between form and content. Kurosawa's vision is sympathetic but sentimental. It is a paradigm of the delusions which he has embodied in most of his characters. The film discloses the psychological and social binds of its characters, and it discloses the contradictions between their delusions and stark reality. But at the same time that Kurosawa exposes the personal contradictions of his characters, he has created yet more in his own work. He does not show us how his characters become oppressed, or who is oppressing them, or how people struggle to be free. There is very little context or perspective.

Some of the characters might have been artists—actors or architects—had they been born into more affluent classes. These characters have visions that Kurosawa makes concrete and visible to us. We become sympathetic to these visions and appreciate their beauty. Yet we also see that the visions are illusory; they are very inadequate substitutes for material reality. Psychologically, the characters' illusions run from neurotic to psychotic, but whatever we term them, the problem remains the same. There is a confusion between concrete reality and imagination or fantasy. And from a political point of view, the illusions are naive, sentimental idealizations.

Take, for example, the trolley-crazy boy. He lives with his mother in a house bordered by a trolley line in the front. In the back there's a long stretch of rubble extending to the slum and connected to it by a clear path which once may have been another trolley run. On the inside of their shack there are hundreds of colorful childlike drawings of trolleys. Mother and son apparently exist on the mother's cooking, sold from a front window—the film gives us only a vague hint about this. The boy “travels” on the path between his house and the slum on his illusory trolley as he rhythmically chants *dodes' ka-den*—the sound of a trolley.

The boy perceives his trolley run as his job. It is here that Kurosawa's art comes out, in concert with the excellent mime of the boy, Yoshitaka Zushi. Before the trolley run starts, the boy inspects the car, and as he does so we hear the clangs of doors. We enter the illusion by watching this dance. We might enjoy it, were it not taking place where it is. In addition to the material context, there is a disturbing personal context—mother and son. The mother, seen praying in the opening scene of the film, is clearly upset by her son, and more so by the crude graffiti on the house and the taunts made by young children. We leave this mother and son with a sense of the mother's complete personal powerlessness to do anything but survive.

Another central focus is a beggar and his young son. They live inside a stripped out car and subsist on scraps that the young boy collects from restaurant kitchens. (It's during one trip that we get one of the few glimpses of life outside the slum since we see shiny new cars.) The father fantasizes; he builds a house in his imagination, beginning with the gate and fence. Each time the film revolves back to him there is some change or addition being made—a new porch, a new color. Kurosawa lets us in on these imaginings. He gives us the various gates, fences, and versions of the cubistic house as it changes in accordance with the father's whim. Magic. Yet the contradiction between the ideal construct (bourgeois though it is) and the very real dilapidated car stands out, as does the contradiction between the father's active imagination and his physical and personal passivity. He is unable to face reality. When his son becomes sick from eating bad food, he simply believes all will be well and doesn't take the help offered to him by an elder of the slum. He is an impotent man with an omnipotent imagination. When the child's cremated remains are in the grave, the father looks down and we see what he sees—a gigantic swimming pool, the final touch to his imagined house. The magic of madness. Life, struggle, and death have no place in his illusions, only fantasies of bourgeois material goods.

There are other characters in the film who make concrete objects under different kinds of oppressive circumstances. Each has his/her own way of dealing with or avoiding despair. Concrete reality is turned into illusion or is repressed. A young girl makes paper flowers to be sold in the city. Because her aunt, who “maintains” her, is in the hospital, she must work twice as hard in order to keep the household together and to pay the bills. Her step-uncle rapes the girl, getting her pregnant. In the rape scene we run into another problem—an act of malicious exploitation is presented as a beautiful pre-raphaelite painting. The girl has passed out from long hours of very tedious labor, her long skirt is drawn up around her thighs and she lies back on a bed of scarlet paper flowers. The camera focuses on this tableau; it is quiet and lovely, but soon the uncle's presence disturbs it.

Kurosawa seems to show us this peaceful vignette of the girl in order for us to “empathize” with the rapist, to “understand” his lust. This is totally backwards, regressive. A film that asks, or manipulates us into, identifying with the oppressor is not very progressive. There are repercussions as well. In an irrational moment the girl almost kills a peddler of sake—a young boy who has been the only person in the film who shows any concern for her. She explains to him (in the only moment of this sequence that she talks) that she was actually trying to commit suicide, and that she struck out at him instead, in a moment of rage and confusion. The boy displays no anger, nor does he know what to do. He offers her something to eat, as he has at other moments, and rides off on his bike—communication doesn’t go very far. Kurosawa portrays monetary and sexual exploitation. He shows us the anger, confusion and despair of an oppressed woman. At the same time, he stops woefully short. The young girl is left essentially alone. No positive relationship or communication supplants the negative ones, and the powerless remain powerless.

The theme of evading reality through wishful thinking is displayed again in the family of a beautiful Buddha-like man who makes dolls—another household industry. His wife is unfaithful to him, and so his six or so children are not his. He makes dolls, not children. When the children ask him if he is their father, he says that they are if they love him best and believe that he is. They acclaim that they do love him best. It is a touching moment, but one which evades reality, fails to ask questions.

Yet another mode of evasion is seen in the drinking and sexuality of two laborers who are married. The two men are perpetually drunk, and in their stupors they periodically switch wives—an activity that provides the community with much gossip. These couples are often humorous with their Chaplinesque drunkenness, colorful bandannas, vivid gestures and funny misunderstandings. But the comedy and the color cover up the pains that must originate in the steamy factory, of which we get one brief inside glimpse.

To live in such a way that one has only dreams, fantasies and delusions as a means of escaping or dealing with intolerable realities is psychologically destructive and politically regressive. Yet a promotion poster for the film proudly talks about the film’s “affirmation of life and its belief that man can overcome any adversity so long as he has his dreams for escape and hope.” Kurosawa has taken a despairing reality and covered it with a veneer of aesthetics. He has made the urban poor into artists who create imaginative worlds and beautiful objects, but who have been so devastated by the material world that they cannot deal with it. He has romanticized the imagination of the urban poor. But he’s failed to give them credit for their potential for perception and struggle. The film becomes a paradigm of the problem it somewhat unconsciously depicts. Thus, the cinematic experience becomes the bourgeois imaginative or delusive equivalent to the psychological delusions of the poor.

Towering Inferno. Earthquake Riches from ruins

by Fred Kaplan

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In the past few years, several of the major Hollywood studios have been releasing a series of disaster films with astounding financial success. The plots are fundamentally the same. A lot of stars playing ordinary people like you and me coincidentally end up on a ship, or in an airplane, a high rise, or a city, and disaster strikes. The ship sinks, the plane is hijacked or damaged, the high rise burns, the city is attacked by an earthquake. The films presenting these grim plots are, respectively, *THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE*, *AIRPORT*, *AIRPORT 1975*, *THE TOWERING INFERNO*, and *EARTHQUAKE*. They have, compositely \$108,000,000 in rentals accrued to the distributors alone. And these figures do not include receipts on *TOWERING INFERNO*, which was released in late December 1974 and has been, at last count (late January 1975), grossing an average of \$722,000 per day. Together then these films constitute what is known as a Mass Media Escapist Trend.

So obviously is this a Trend that entertainment editors have lately sought to tap the wisdom of the nation's leading social-psychologists on the phenomenon. Erich Fromm and Ernest van den Haag, to name two of the more notable, have hypothesized that this is all intimately connected with Watergate and the current economic crisis. People are fearful of disaster, they claim, and so allow these anxieties to be sublimated through the cathartic but visceral experience of disaster on film. These movies are also said to tap a vital but suppressed masochism permeating our national consciousness.

This, I submit, is vague nonsense, and indicates only that these rightfully esteemed scholars know little about film history, less of the workings of the motion-picture industry, and probably haven't seen any of the movies in question.

In order to get an analytical grip on this sort of mass media Trend, one should ask three key questions: (1) Who's behind the production of the films constituting this Trend? (2) Why are these films so popular? and

(a) Why now?

First, who's behind these box-office bonanzas? What sort of things have they produced in the past? Going back to the beginning of this Trend (that is, the beginning of the particular phase—the disaster genre itself is ancient), the novel *Airport* was written by Arthur Hailey. He has made a lucrative career of writing schlock novels about diverse collections of people in big, exciting places (*Hotel* was another bestseller of his). *Airport* rose to the top of bookselling charts in 1968—several years, by the way, before anyone outside the D.C. area had ever heard of Watergate, during a time when almost nobody was feeling any sores of the economy or guilt over Vietnam. Ross Hunter, who produced the enormously popular film version of Hailey's novel, has always turned out fluff, having drawn a veritable fortune from Doris Day Rock Hudson romance movies. Irwin Allen, who produced *THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE* and, later, *TOWERING INFERNO*, has in the past been responsible for *VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA*, *FIVE WEEKS IN A BALLOON*, the TV series *LOST IN SPACE*, and other adventure packages. Thomas Scortia, co-author of one of the books on which *TOWERING INFERNO* is based, used to be a physiochemist. He was just interested in what might happen if the electrical wiring for a high rise failed, did some research, and wrote a hack novel. That's all.

In other words, these people are doing with the current slew of disaster films, the same sorts of things that they've been doing for the past twenty years. Ross Hunter, Irwin Allen, Jennings Lang and Mark Robson (the latter two being the executive producer and the producer director of *EARTHQUAKE*) are not, with their latest picture, trying to placate or cash in on any economic *Zeitgeist*. They are not students of social trends, and neither is anyone else in the higher echelons of Universal, Warner Brothers or 20th Century-Fox. They are, however, paid very well for keeping track of marketing trends in movie houses all over the country, these days even using sophisticated demographic computer techniques. Hunter produced *AIRPORT* from a novel that ten million Americans had read and found that he had a dynamite hit on his hands. Allen produced *POSEIDON ADVENTURE* shortly thereafter, which yielded the same results. Movie producers, not being people to let a good thing zoom by without hopping on, devoted lavish budgets, hoping to outdo each other at the box office with the biggest, most realistic, star-studded, cornball-heroic Disaster attractions ever. As Jennings Lang summed it up to *EARTHQUAKE*'s screenwriter, George Fox: "Our job is to make damn sure people know *EARTHQUAKE* is an event!"

If the new crop of U.S. disaster movies exists for the sake of their being "events," the logical question to ask here, then, is Question Number Two: Why are people flocking to an event, particularly to these events? Fundamentally, the answer is one concerning the essential boredom of modern life as experienced by millions. People's lives are drab at the core, their jobs routine and monotonous, their loves wilted, their attachments on the wane. Community ties are ephemeral, if not severed;

many feel alienated from politics and culture. The dreams of their social conditioning have, in many cases, remained mere dreams, and often even the image has faded. All that's left is the "phantom" within them, which they avoid facing at all costs.

Excitement, then, is sought, and it comes almost exclusively through visceral means. This has nearly always been so, except in times of great war, when the spirits are lifted to common cause, and during the ages of religious vitality (or any quick substitute, such as romantic fascism), when everyday ennui doesn't matter because there's always an afterlife or the Reich. But the church today is just another institution, Vietnam turned out to be a disappointment, and the national leadership has been a drag for more than a decade. This is in addition to the boredom already existing on a more immediate level. So, these disaster entertainments—or anything really big and action packed and exciting—sell in a very big way.

At this point, it would be useful to sketch the outlines of what goes on in the two most recent of this escapist batch. EARTHQUAKE begins with Charlton Heston trapped in a wretched marriage with Ava Gardner in Los Angeles. Heston used to be a big football star, but his wife is the daughter of the chairman-of-the-board of a huge architectural corporation, and so, through, various forms of domestic bribery, Heston has been promoted in the firm to the level, eventually, of President. His wife is still a stereotypically hateful, nagging, suicidal bitch, however. So he commences an affair with a charming widowed actress (played by Genevieve Bujold) who has a cute son.

We then cut to George Kennedy as a cop who wanted, when he was a kid, to be a policeman out of a desire to help people. Now he sees that it's all a racket, and that policemen pay more attention to protecting Zsa Zsa Gabor's shrubbery than to capturing violators of law 'n order. We then cut to all sorts of different people. Marjoe Gortner is a small grocer enlisted in the National Guard, suffering from an extremely sadistic anal-drive (will Marjoe, the famous ex-evangelist, be playing devils and psychopaths forever?). Richard Roundtree is a black motorcycle freak who's out to whip Evel Knievel, but who's having a hard time working up his act. And a cast of thousands, living, loving, fighting, hoping, helping, hating, and so on.

Then, the Earthquake. At first, it's just a mildly jolting tremor, typical of Los Angeles. But a graduate assistant at the Seismology Institute predicts a tremendous earthquake within hours. His superiors, The Experts, don't listen, however, thinking that he's Overreacting. Also, the head of the Institute doesn't want to release the information because if it's incorrect, the Institute will lose all credibility, and he expects a huge Foundation grant in a matter of months. (The audience moans in recognition.) Finally, the head of the Institute goes to the Mayor with the news, but he declines to issue an order of evacuation to the citizenry because it would provoke panic and, besides, he might look like an ass if the quake didn't strike. (Moans again.)

Finally, the earthquake hits. Everybody's affected. The cop gets to help people. The grocer turns sadistic in militia action. Charlton Heston and his father-in-law, the chairman-of-the-board (played by Lorne Greene, with all the trustworthiness of Walter Cronkite), help their employees and the townsfolk. This goes on for nearly an hour, as the audience marvels at the astounding visual effects, the realistic and gory deaths, the close-up destruction of whole buildings, blocks, an entire city. And there is S-E-N-S-S-U-R-O-U-N-D, the film's sound-effect gimmick that makes you shake in your seat while the tremors erupt on the screen.

Heroism is the keynote of the day, practiced by nearly everyone, except, of course, the top public-officials and one demented crazy. Toward the end, Charlton Heston and George Kennedy, working together, rescue eighty or so people from an underground medical shelter that's caved in. Heston's got just about everybody up to the surface. But then tons of water from the busted dam whoosh through the pipeway. Heston begins climbing up the ladder to safety, his lovely girlfriend lovingly awaiting him. But then he notices his wife struggling in the water about to drown. She had been climbing the ladder herself, but somebody (probably the girlfriend, but the editing is sloppy and it's difficult to tell) stepped on the wife's hands, causing her to fall. Anyway, Heston dives back into the water, going after his wife, and the two of them drown, together, in the process. Upstairs, L.A. has been transformed into a gruesome and smoking Gomorrah—"This used to be a hell of a town," says one person. But the people will doubtless get things back together through self-help.

In other words, you have in EARTHQUAKE a natural box-office smash. You have some of the most realistic flames and tremors on film, encompassing all of Los Angeles. You have two great heroes who save hundreds of lives. You have good guys, bad guys, a fast car chase (!), falling buildings, crashing glass, people running and screaming and dying all over the place. The film is big, it is fast, it is action drenched and star-coated.

Furthermore, it's not really a disaster film in any upsetting sort of way. All of our traditional values are upheld. Charlton Heston, playing a modern Moses and Jesus Christ rolled in one, can climb up to his girlfriend but instead sacrifices himself to the duties of The Family. Self-help and sacrifice are continually exhorted as the Keys that can unlock any problem in which we seem to be trapped. The anal-retentive, sexually crazed, maniacal madman in this film is antireligious to boot; a lot of other, more decent folk silently pray. Business executives are kind and self-sacrificing, as Lorne Greene and Charlton Heston munificently illustrate. In the meantime, certain traditional U.S. antagonists are hoisted onto the whipping post again. Experts in particular. All of the high-ranked at the Seismology Institute find speculation of huge earthquake to be nonsense; it's a modest graduate assistant who perceives the truth. The public officials who operate the dam at the edge of the city scoff when told that the dam might burst; it's a common laborer who detects reality.

In other words, EARTHQUAKE has numerous points of appeal to a broad audience. There is enough action to keep the 9-to-5 crowd in a supreme high for weeks. There's disaster, exciting disaster, but all of the middle-class values reign victorious and enshrined in the end. And the causes of negligence and exacerbation are the very enemies of these values. Domestic havoc, official arrogance, anti-religiousness, and politicians' cowardice are associated with the quake; marital values upheld to the death, the little man (but, note, always played by a famous Hollywood movie star, and self-reliance (naturally, on unrealistic terms) culminate at the climax at the quake's subsiding.

In THE TOWERING INFERNO, the symbolic devices are not quite so blatant, but the tale contains many of the same ingredients. Every important official and socialite in San Francisco is celebrating the dedication of the city's new 138-story office-and-apartment tower, the tallest building in the world, in the ballroom at the tower's top floor. But a fire has been blazing in the storage room on the 81st floor, due to faulty wiring, and it soon explodes, engulfing several floors above in violent flames. We learn that Electrical Contractor Richard Chamberlain, with the implicit sanction of Architectural Firm President William Holden, wickedly cut costs by \$2 million. They deliberately compromised Chief Architect Paul Newman's electrical specifications, lowering them just to the point where they meet the hopelessly inadequate City Code. Result: The deaths of hundreds.

In the meantime, the heroism in the fire-fighting and attempts at survival are outlandishly, but stiffly and respectably, noble. Paul Newman and Chief Fireman Steve McQueen save lives, swing through the air thousands of feet above ground, gallop all over the towering inferno, risk their lives time and time again. Finally, by detonating a bomb that will explode same water tanks at the top of the tower and extinguish the fire, they save hundreds more. And they do all this without so much as wrinkling their ties or even sweating, remaining absolutely Cool—and dead serious—at all times. The guests at the top—Mayor, Senator, Con Man, Glamour Girl, etc.—panic a bit, true, but their patience and calm are in the main admirable. The only real coward is that Electrical Contractor, who skips his turn in line to get out and sends half-a-dozen to their plummeting deaths besides. He gets killed, too, and the audience applauds appreciatively.

Finally, after several missions of derring-do, comprising the bulk of this three-hour extravaganza, the survivors get back down to earth. Lovers Paul Newman and Faye Dunaway are sitting on some steps. Newman, who wrestled with a grizzly bear at age nine and who expressed at the beginning of the movie his desire to move out to the wilderness, points to the tower and says that it ought to be left standing “as a shrine to all the bullshit in the world.” Chief Fireman Steve McQueen comes over and says that he knows how these firetraps should be built, and to call him in the morning. All the other characters are hugging and kissing, or suffering with a stiff upper lip, and going back to life.

This is a Big Big Movie-Movie. There is mindless excitement, thrills and spills, perhaps beyond—quantitatively—anything that’s ever been put on screen, thanks to Hollywood’s advanced technology. And still, all the old disaster clichés are dished out again: the affairs and new loves that get wiped out in flames; the evil bad-guy who’s responsible for it all; the two sweet kids who are saved. There are even lines of dialogue, such as those recited by the couple that can’t get through to their daughter by phone in which the wife laments, “She doesn’t even know the number of our safety deposit box.” The hubby, chuckling, with the humor and love that has marked a happy marriage of many years, replies, “Oh, the things, dear, you sometimes say.”

It’s a movie that—except for the fact that non-value-laden references are made to non-marital sex—might have been written 25 years ago. But now it’s touched up by a grandiose technician who knows that the Bigness that Americans so love can finally be shown, explicitly, with awesome technical skill. We are made to gape in wonder at all the deaths, human fireballs and magnificent flames we set eyes on—without knowing anything more than what a comic-book might reveal about the people entrapped. The film has no *explicit* message, except perhaps, “Give to your local firemen’s association.” Newman’s allusion to the “bullshit in the world”—what is it? Is it huge high rises? cities? kickbacks and government-business dirty deals? Nothing is elaborated or even generalized. It’s just, you know, bullshit.

But this doesn’t matter. Substance is not what has caused this film, after all, to have made more than \$28 million in its first 39 days of release. It’s the pyrotechnics, the huge spectacle of it all—the enormous tower, the grand two-dimensional heroism, the explicitly typed characters, the big stars. And it is, on a pure nonsense level, fairly exciting and suspenseful. You don’t have to think about anything. You merely have to respond to the spinnings of this giant machine’s cogs and levers. Indeed, the implicit bourgeois orientation—and this can be said for EARTHQUAKE and all the others as well—serves less as propaganda than as a sort of neutralizing device that allows the crowd to enjoy the ride without being mentally distracted. Middle-class values have become so embedded in the classic Hollywood mentality over the years that they have come to be used, like soporific Muzak, as a backdrop—loaded as it is—to the action.

There’s talk of kickbacks and government deals; but you don’t have to think, you are not invited to think, about this, either. The arrangements and payoffs of this scheme aren’t spelled out in the least. You aren’t supposed to wonder why nobody checked up on the wiring before the day of the gala affair, for example. All you have to do is to respond to evil Richard Chamberlain, easily the most loathsome sonofabitch on screen in ages. When he gets hurled to his death, it’s a relief (though, since the film is so stiff, not really cathartic). There are no more evil people, at least not here. And now all you have to do is be on the lookout for slicksters like Richard Chamberlain. If you can stop them, our troubles will be solved. Life is made simple. And terribly thrilling.

To the third and final question, then: Why are these films finding such a huge market now? A historical sort of analysis is appropriate here, though nothing so obtuse or immaterial a concept as that pondered by Fromm and van den Haag. The film, *AIRPORT*, recall, was released in 1970, at a time when many of the more traditional moviegoers were dropping out of the ranks because the big hits, the giants that the studios were trying to imitate, were films like *BONNIE & CLYDE*, *EASY RIDER*, *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*, *THE GRADUATE*. These were films for a whole new audience, films derived from the European films that were beginning to receive popular attention from Americans in the 60s. These films furthermore were rooted in the Sixties youth movement. Many of the traditional moviegoers did not understand any of this, were xenophobic of foreign film elements, confused about contemporary youth, could not identify with these films' characters, could not understand what they were saying. And then came *AIRPORT*. The old times did live after all! And people flocked to embrace them, brought their kids along, and immersed themselves nostalgically. Studio execs got the message, and—as described above—started making 'em “bigger ‘n better.” This revived audience, knowing what to expect from these movies, and now joined by others looking for “old fashioned” (i.e., simple) thrills, and still others simply curious as to what all the lines and ballyhoo ads are all about, queue up nightly for their towering opiate.

It is not the current economic or political crisis that is spurring these films on to box-office success. Nor does “stagflation” or Watergate have anything to do with the inspiration that created them. These films would have succeeded in any time (as, indeed, many similar films have succeeded), so long as there existed a sizable portion of the population that is bored. They were made because the studios were going broke, saw success sizzling in a surefire—and absolutely familiar—formula, and latched on before the flames died out.

Escapism in mass media flourishes in all times, through all periods of prosperity and decline, for all social classes, in various forms. The success of these disaster films lies not so much in the fact that they are disaster films, as that they are stupendous films. It is through showing earthquakes, fires, crashing buildings, and on and on, that the Hollywood moguls can show off all their technology all the more blatantly. It's like the old Cinerama rollercoaster rides, but in this case, some of the biggest box-office stars of the past decade are riding in the rollercoaster along with us.

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Juggernaut

We bombed in mid-ocean

by Gerald Peary

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Among the brilliant minds encountered by Poe's prototype detective, Auguste Dupin, was an eight-year old schoolboy, whose uncanny skill at ascertaining whether an opponent held concealed an odd or even number of marbles won him both "universal admiration" and all the marbles of the school.

As Dupin explained at solemn length in *The Purloined Letter*, this enterprising lad was more than "lucky." He was the perfect master of the most elementary principle of deduction: empathetic reasoning, thrusting oneself into the mind of the opponent. By shrewdly approximating the mental strategies of his adversary, the boy would, more often than not, "guess" correctly, tilting the 50-50 random predicting of odd or even to his own mathematical advantage.

At the tense conclusion of *JUGGERNAUT*, a similar puzzle confronts Richard Lester's sleuthlike bomb disposal expert, Fallon (Richard Harris), but on a grand and potentially apocalyptic scale. Which wire to cut, red or blue? One wire split will deactivate the system of interlocking bombs placed in the hold of *The Britannic*, the threatened oceanic liner. Yet the wrong wire severed could trigger an explosion sending Fallon to his Maker (a Deistic clockmaker, no doubt) and a thousandfold passengers and crew to the bottom of the sea.

What will Fallon do? He began this venture as cool, crisp, and possessed as any polite English detective, puffing his Holmes pipe and undoing the bomb with the deft expertise of a safecracker on the guards' night off. As much as anyone aboard *The Britannic*, on which the Anglican uppercrust sail the Great White Way, Fallon himself is meant to recall *The Titanic* on its smug maiden journey—before disaster, the iceberg, the juggernaut, struck potently in the night.

For Fallon also, the night turns crazy. His own Watson, partner Charlie Braddock (David Hemmings), is blown to bits and pieces on the job, an

irrational and unjust end to a beautiful male friendship. And his own Dr. Moriarty, alias Juggernaut, the Mad Bomber, looms victorious. For a time, Fallon is shattered—but also miraculously humanized and transformed.

Reeking of alcohol, recklessly spewing cigarette smoke into the belly of the bomb, Fallon faces the deadly machine with new determination. Red wire or blue? As Poe's schoolboy, Fallon holds a thin-dime psychological advantage over the apparent arbitrariness of the situation. He knows the Mad Bomber, this Juggernaut, who built the lethal contraption—they were once comrades, now estranged. Also he possesses a precious clue to unravel: Juggernaut's message, "Cut the blue wire! The blue wire!"

Fallon's ultimate decision propels a dandy, totally satisfying conclusion to JUGGERNAUT, Richard Lester's crack detective story wrapped in the strange commercial guise of yet another "disaster" picture. Lester abides by the post POSEIDON formula of packing a ship with problem-laden sinking stars and starlets (like EARTHQUAKE, or GRAND HOTEL UNDER LAVA), but his sharp narrative tale comes first. Though JUGGERNAUT's nominal lead, Omar Sharif, walks *The Britannic* deck, posing uncomfortably as the Captain, Lester keeps his camera as much as possible down in the hold, where man meets bomb. In fact, Lester could brag that "I shot the Sharif" hardly at all.

If Lester can be forgiven for slighting Captain Omar (who seems too weirdly preoccupied by Lawrence of Arabia, or Lara of Russia, or some other ghostly presence to be useful), he should be criticized soundly for keeping his woman characters roped off from the action. Barbara Banister (Shirley Knight) lives up to her other woman soapopera name by spending the whole movie in lukewarm heat, prowling after the Captain's body and soul. Susan McLeod (Caroline Mortimer) passes her time frowning, and with an eternal headache. Neither woman seems to care if *The Britannic* sinks or swims, they are so irrelevant to the central crisis. Richard Lester should have known better. Even Shelley Winters, heroically puffing underwater in THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE, is more progressive.

Thematically, JUGGERNAUT continues the paranoid position papers of its Philadelphia ex-psych-in-exile director, a further investigation by Richard Lester into the omnipresent lunacy of the world. As he has done so often before, he utilizes the universal symbol of sanity, the solidly pedigreed British citizen, as whipping boy to demonstrate that every model of human propriety hides (ineffectually) an obsessed, destructive loony underneath.

What better behaviorist catalyst for this revelation of character than a well-placed bomb? In JUGGERNAUT, the explosives are stifled, Pandora's Box is closed, before more than a touch of craziness escapes. Yet peer quickly and discover the Juggernaut, the mad Jack-in-the-Box, is not only Fallon's dark alter ego, but you.

More directly pointed was the hardly seen, unpopular THE BED

SITTING ROOM. Richard Lester's complete Story of Man. There, no miracle disposal team interfered to repress the Truth. The big bomb erupted, the Hydrogen Bomb, and a bunch of banana brains—jumping, running, and standing still—emerged to inherit the earth.

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The Harder They Come Cultural colonialism and the American dream

by Julianne Burton

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When Ivan, a six-gun in each hand, gold star blazing on his T-shirt, steps out from the brush on the shimmering Jamaican cay to meet a phalanx of machine-gun bearing infantrymen, his attempt to live out the American dream on that colonized Caribbean island has reached a dead end. He is a rebel whose options are revealed to have been predefined and controlled by the very forces against which that rebellion is directed. A country boy determined to “make it” in the city, he seeks stardom by way of pop culture. Reggae music and the *ganja* (dope) trade, the only apparent paths to wealth and power, have long since come under the monopolistic control of the police and the monied entrepreneurs. It is only through violence that Ivan succeeds in achieving fame. But his violent response and his highly individualistic version of “making it” isolate him. They make him a target in such a way that no matter how hard he really wants, he can “get it” and enjoy it only for a brief moment before they get him.

The opening scenes of Perry Henzell’s *THE HARDER THEY COME* depict the last moments in the process of Ivan’s separation from traditional life. The initial footage moves from a shot of virginal Jamaican coastline, rain-swept and apparently untouched by civilization, to the teeming, menacing streets of West Kingston, where Ivan is immediately initiated into the ethics of brother ripping off brother. He is promptly divested of everything including a treasured mango, last proud token of life in the country, which he carried as a kind of offering to his mother.

The thread linking the backwater with the capital is an emblem of third world experience. It’s an ancient rickety box of a bus, interior crammed with anxious passengers, roof decked with their luggage, careening down sinuous mountain roads. In this light, the near collision with the oncoming truck takes on a symbolic dimension, prophesying Ivan’s

imminent clash with his new environment. Still, the sequence's tremendous comic vitality and its precise recreation of a characteristic third world experience make any symbolic significance supplementary at best. A billboard touting "Shell, The Good Mileage Gasman" (sic), followed by another which exhorts, "See Phillip Waite for a Better Life," herald Ivan's arrival in civilization. The driver of a long white convertible, flanked by two attractive young women, provides Ivan's first real glimpse of what the "haves" have. His exposure to the lifestyle of the affluent continues as he desperately hunts for work at construction sites and in the plush suburbs, and (after being accused of doing nothing but begging) unsuccessfully bums small change at posh hotels.

This fruitless quest brings Ivan face to face with the imbalance and injustice of the society he so unsuspectingly came to join. He confronts its underbelly. Exhausted and penniless, he surveys the last alternative—ragged human scavengers pawing through the detritus of a society that has relegated them to a dump which seems to have no end. Desperation drives him to appeal to the Preacher, whom his mother had referred him to. It is while he is in the Preacher's employ that he begins to court Elsa, the Preacher's ward, and gets his chance to make a record. Banished from the Preacher's premises for violating the sanctity of the church with his music, he takes both Elsa and the bicycle he had painstakingly reconstructed with him. Elsa comes voluntarily, but Ivan is forced to fight for the bicycle, and he is subsequently jailed and publicly flogged.

Success follows close on the heels of humiliation, or so it appears, when the head of the recording company likes his record. But rather than accept a meager twenty dollars for his song, Ivan goes all over town in a futile attempt to break Hilton's record monopoly. All legitimate paths to success only offer him, at best, token participation in the world he longs to be a part of. The ganja trade, though subject to the same patterns of exploitation, is at least slightly more lucrative. But here, too, Ivan asks too many questions, and so he becomes an outlaw even among the "criminals."

His daring escapes, his flashy style, his defiant resistance make him folk hero of the ghetto and the scourge of the police. But the heat inevitably becomes too intense. All the forces which have separately conspired to keep him (and others like him) down now converge to capture him. With only the vaguest notion of what might await him there, Ivan agrees to flee to Cuba. But he literally misses the boat and, wounded and exhausted, summons all his nerve for one last stand.

Despite his rejection of existing structures and his attempt, however faltering, to unravel the network of exploitation, Ivan never overcomes the isolation to which his own narrow self-interest confines him. His idea of the alternative to misery, squalor and exploitation is a purely individualistic one, shaped as it is by the same forces responsible for the conditions of his oppression. Reacting to the injustices of a capitalist dominated, neocolonial society, he can only emulate the Wild West gunmen and underworld hoods—always cut off from their fellow human

beings—which that society exalts and exports as its (ill-fated) heroes.

But for the skill and subtlety with which it is done, the film might be seen as a glossary on modes of commercial, consumption oriented popular culture. Ivan's first act, after conveying the news of his grandmother's death to his aging mother, is to go to the Rialto to see a spaghetti western in which Franco Nero, surrounded by a horde of red-hooded assailants, uses his technological advantage (a machine gun) to mow down his attackers on the spot. Ivan begins to dress in slick city style like the local "rude boys," with flashy hats, shades, shiny shirts and black vinyl vents. The sounds of reggae are ever present on the ubiquitous transistor radio. Ivan's only private space in the early part of the film, the carcass of an old car in the Preacher's yard, contains other evidence of the new-found cultural forms which are re-shaping his consciousness: a "Top Guns of the West" comic book, an issue of *Playboy* magazine, a garishly surreal toy pistol, and a number of nude pin-ups, all white.

In the course of the action, the toy gun is replaced by real ones, the reconstructed bicycle by a Honda bought with earnings from the *ganja* trade, the wrecked car with an enormous convertible. This last possession is white like all the other vehicles in the film which symbolize power and wealth—Hilton's, the police detective's, and the convertible in the opening sequence. We also hear one radio ad captured in its entirety on the soundtrack:

"You can tell it's Chantal Olive Oil Pommade.
Makes your hair soft, smooth, and easy to manage."

Such an ad is the prototype of commercialism and profit-making based on encouraging a race's rejection of its own physical characteristics.

A wide range of media serve as agents of Ivan's notoriety, but he realizes their inherent distortions. "They say that you killed a policeman," Elsa tells him. "I killed three," is Ivan's reply. Aware of the formative importance of media in the society, Ivan tries to channel them to his own uses. Flamboyantly dressed, he has a photographer capture his ferocious gun-toting poses and sends his favorite to the editor of the newspaper. He scrawls a note—which he sends to the same source—revealing the existence of the record which Hilton, loathe to promote the career of an unmistakable "trouble maker," had long since filed away but now greedily unearths. It is never clear whether the crude scrawls on the walls of the shanty town ("I was here but I disappear") originate with Ivan or are merely a spontaneous expression of popular identification with him.

These modes of popular culture are clearly of secondary importance when compared to the central cultural metaphors of the movie: music and film. *THE HARDER THEY COME* is framed, slightly asymmetrically, by references to another film, giving this movie a kind of self-reflective awareness that goes far beyond the now-clichéd use of the play within the play, the novel within the novel. The filmmakers

chose to convey Ivan's story through an artistic medium—film. But as they go about their creative task they are also exploring and exposing the impact of that medium on the culture they are trying to portray through it.

The action of the final scene reverts to the massacred sob and the cheering crowds at the Rialto. Jose's contemptuous dictum that the hero can't die until the last reel rings in Ivan's ears as he faces his own posse. Amidst the indistinguishable shouts of the audience, one cry—"Ivan"—stands out because it was absent from the original scene. Whether it is an indication of Ivan's mythification of his own death in order to face it, or a cry from the masses of his downtrodden countrymen/women who (either, at that moment or long after his death) hail him as a hero, is not a crucial distinction. In both cases his is revealed to be a hollow heroism.

Music is a constant presence and such a powerful, multi-faceted one that I am tempted to assert that never has a lyric score been so well integrated into a film. It functions on a number of levels, catalyzing the emotions of the audience with its sensual beat, conspiring with the visual image to draw the viewer deeper into the emotional experience of the film, supplementing or offering ironic counterpoint to the meaning of what is registered by the camera eye. The songs of the score work to foreshadow ("Johnny Too Bad"), to integrate disparate sequences ("Many Rivers to Cross"), as a counterpoint to the action ("Sitting in Limbo," "Pressure Drop"), and as an ironic expose of false consciousness. In this instance, the words to the song which Hilton rejects in the impromptu driveway audition are these:

"We are all one big brother, all belong to one father. We were fashioned perfectly, made to live in harmony. Let peace be our motto..."

The gospel music, indeed the entire church sequence, is a poignant illustration of enforced cultural sublimation through conformity to expressive modes acceptable to the oppressor. The lyrics of "Rivers of Babylon" are heard:

"By the rivers of Babylon
Where we sat down
And there we wept
When we remembered Zion
But the wicked carried us away into captivity
Require from us a song
How can we sing King Alfa song
In a strange land? ..."

Though not a part of the church sequence, the words articulate this cultural phenomenon beautifully through the image of the slave experience and the fact that it must be conveyed through borrowings from an alien cultural context (the Old Testament). Only in this way will

.. the words of our mouths

And the meditations of our beards
Be acceptable in thy sight
over I.”

It is not the divine but the earthly master who requires much strict control of speech and thought. On another level, this song serves as a metaphor for the events of the film, describing Ivan’s experience in capsule form. For he does, in fact, aspire to produce the song required by the master. That is the only means by which he can hope to achieve a spurious dignity within the existing structures. But since his song is indeed a “song of freedom,” “the wicked” reject and banish him.

The meaning of the two theme songs, “You Can Get It if You Really Want” and “The Harder They Come,” evolves and changes as the action progresses. The film opens with the former song as Ivan, full of innocence and optimism, approaches the city. The song recurs when he triumphantly coasts over a golf course in a car he commandeered at gunpoint. The jubilation of this scene, the beauty of its fusion of song and image, should not obscure the superb irony here. Ivan had to become a criminal and an outlaw to get what he considers to be his rightful share, to realize his “dream.” This fact precludes more than a momentary savoring of his triumph.

In comparison, the title song is more complex. Allusions to “persecution” and “opposition” give way to the concept of “the oppressors.” There is an attempt to identify the means and methods at their disposal:

·*religious palliatives*: “Well they tell me of the pie up in the sky /
Waiting for me when I die.”

·*indifference*: “They never seem to hear even your cry.”

·*the threat of social isolation*: “.. trying to drive me underground.”

The first song acknowledges the necessity of confrontation and struggle, but the title song goes further in articulating the price:

“And I’ll keep on fighting for the things I want
Though I know that when you’re dead you can’t
But I’d rather be a free man in my grave
Than living as a puppet or a slave.’

In the larger context, both music and film—and, to a lesser extent, the entire catalogue of forms of popular culture which appear in the film—are depicted in such a way that they offer an explosive self-indictment. Movies are not a harmless form of diversion and escape, but a powerful agent of socialization and mystification. The music industry, though it may still be viewed by oppressed Jamaicans as the only way to get into the mainstream, is here revealed to be a delusion and a trap. The dream of wealth, power and social integration for anyone who wants it badly enough and strives hard enough, a dream which all these forms of popular culture are marshaled to simultaneously tout and protect, is here exposed as a manipulative myth.

When it fails—or, as in Ivan’s case, when it succeeds too well—this camouflaged first line of defense parts to reveal more brutal mechanisms of social control. The film makes it clear that those who preside over the chaos end apparent freedom of the cultural marketplace (symbolized by Hilton) are in close alliance with those who defend the existing power structure from any real threat (Detective Jones, his troops, and him superiors). This explains why Jones can prevent Ivan’s picture from appearing in the newspaper and even dare to tamper with the hit parade.

Some may see Ivan’s death as an apotheosis, or as a mythic reconciliation of an irreconcilable conflict. If the context of the film is carefully considered, it is seen instead to represent the final exposé of the futility and vulnerability of the “make it on your own, get your share, and never mind the others” philosophy. Ivan’s rags to riches dream is exposed at the end of the film to be the corrupting, deceptive lie that it is. To what end his martyrdom? Nothing has changed in shantytown. The ganja trade will resume under the vigilant control of the police as before. Jose will return to keep the traders in line. Though the latter may receive a slightly larger cut and thus reap some benefit from Ivan’s example, Ivan will, as he himself predicts, be completely forgotten. The only seeds of hope in the movie lie in the possibility that the traders, so successfully manipulated by their police “protectors” that they become the would-be agents of Ivan’s capture, will act on the implications of mutual solidarity suggested by Ivan’s failure to overthrow those who exploit others’ risk for personal profit. This mental trajectory takes us out of shantytown, out of Kingston, out of Jamaica, and into the larger world of the powers who control what was in the film only a microcosm of neocolonial exploitation. The fact that the film both exposes the dead-end nature of Ivan’s each-man-for-himself trip and implicitly raises the question of how to avoid such dead ends is what makes this much an extraordinary movie.

Few others succeed as it does in using the film code to clarify rather than to mystify the workings of oppression. Its ideological significance is a function of the disparity between Ivan’s limited perspective and the broader analysis conveyed to the audience by the composite experience of the film. I do not claim that this is a truly *revolutionary* film—who among us has seen one? But it is not faint praise to say that *THE HARDER THEY COME* is a committed and genuinely progressive film, of both artistic and ideological integrity. (1)

And the film does succeed on an artistic as well as an ideological level. Viewers should not be deceived by a certain grittiness of film style, a rough-edged articulation in places. Though made on a low budget with an inexperienced cast and filmed primarily outdoors with natural light, this is not a “home movie.” Intelligently conceived and skillfully executed, it is of undeniable cinematic quality despite the inevitable financial and technical limitations which plague filmmakers outside the net of corporate industry. The visual style of the film achieves an unusual synthesis of Hollywood and cinema vérité. Particular

techniques derive from such disparate sources as experimental underground cinema and publicity spots. The important thing is not to trace the derivation but to note how the filmic language, as it interacts with the plot and the score, rises above mere imitation of foreign models to create an original synthesis.

It is in its pacing that the film demonstrates its greatest debt to Hollywood style and its greatest divergence from other third world films. The plot line is pared down to its essentials and the action comes on swift and hard-hitting, in the best Hollywood tradition, through the sophisticated use of several techniques:

- multiple short episodic sequences*: e.g., job hunting in the suburbs and on a construction site, the threatening vigilance of the vegetable vendor in the market, the panorama of the dump; or the numerous short sequences which depict all the police methods used in searching for Ivan
- intercutting*: e.g., Jose's blowing the whistle on Ivan, and the subsequent motorcycle chase; the bicycle ride along the ocean as the Preacher ransacks Ivan's car; the church celebration, the preacher's suspicious glances at Elsa and Ivan, Elsa's sexual fantasies, and the orgasmic gyrations of particular members of the congregation
- voices over*: e.g., Jose's thoughts as he pursues Ivan through the alleyways of shanty town; the news story of Ivan's exploits over scenes of the shanty town's excited response
- the skillful use of *music*, already discussed.

In the close-ups of mouth and tongue and hard-to-identify skin surfaces (Ivan's making love to one of Jose's women), we see an incorporation of techniques confined not too long ago to underground cinema. Throughout the film, the camera skillfully shifts points of view, using subjectivity sparingly but well (e.g., the departure of the street vendor-thief glimpsed across the congested street; the fatally wounded motorcycle cop's loss of control). There is perhaps an inordinate fascination with the zoom lens, but this only merits comment because of the danger that the expressiveness with which zoom shots are used in several sequences might pass unperceived if the technique is overused.

Perhaps the most striking instance of this technique is the parallel tracking shot—beautifully composed of multiple horizontal planes—of Ivan and Elsa bicycling along a causeway between two bands of water. When the camera zooms out we realize that what at first appeared to be an idyllic setting is really another dump filled with discards and debris. It is a visual metaphor for the fact that their relationship cannot but be contaminated and corrupted by the surrounding environment, that they will be defeated by the larger context.

Unexpected transitions serve to underline changes in Ivan's situation. The lyrical sequence of graceful white egrets scattering into flight as Ivan triumphantly cruises the flawless greens of a golf course in an open convertible is brusquely supplanted by a shot of crabs scurrying through the ooze of the swamp before the soldiers threatening tread. Ivan's triumph gives way to flight and inevitable capture. The unreality of the

hotel sequence, independent of the magnificent still montage of Ivan's shoot-'em-up poses, results from a particular style of shooting not seen elsewhere in the film. Camera angle, composition, and lighting recall Madison Avenue publicity techniques—cigarette ads of couples at poolside upstaged by the rugged individualist male smoker in the foreground, liquor ads of a man and a woman, glass in hand, silhouetted against a tropical sunset. The contrived publicity techniques (director Perry Henzell worked in advertising in Britain for ten years) used to draw Ivan and others like him into the world he so desperately aspired to join are used by the filmmakers to expose the artificiality of that world.

There is throughout the film a conscious attempt to avoid easy exoticism and folklorizing, a common pitfall of third world films. The exotic elements which do appear in the film—the hairstyles of Pedro and Rupert, the remarkable hookah—are a function of realities essential to the film's development. (A Jamaican audience would immediately recognize Pedro and Rupert as members of the Rastafarians, an important political-religious sect in Jamaica who, inspired by a text from Leviticus, never take a razor to their head; the pipe smoker's skill serves to point up Ivan's naiveté and inexperience.) In the light of this refusal to compromise standards, the final sequence of the film—a gyrating female-pelvis, clad in shimmering multicolored lamé, over which the credits are viewed—appears to be the most facile and commercializing of the entire film. One is tempted to call it cheap. Still, in juxtaposition to the opening scene of timeless primeval coastline, this faceless woman's rhythmic undulations symbolize “modern,” “civilized” Jamaica. The beat goes on after the hero's death with an indifference which underscores the futility of his martyrdom.

The restricted view of female anatomy which closes out a film so dominated by the macho mystique calls the sexual assumptions of the film into question. The female figures, most often portrayed in association with the collaborative and regressive agency of the Church, are almost incidental to the plot, except for the inescapable fact that it is Elsa who betrays Ivan at the end. (The impact of her betrayal is only slightly undercut by the fact of Jose's betrayal of Ivan earlier in the film.)

Is this but another clichéd instance of the treacherous woman who, inexplicably but inevitably, turns on the hero? Or is the character of Elsa, despite the progressive diminution of her role, given at least a modicum of justification for her final decision? It is never clear whether the one scene of sexual fulfillment between Elsa and Ivan—two black bodies half-immersed in the shimmering sea—occurs independent of Elsa's fantasies. What is certain is that there is no other scene which portrays a mutually fulfilling interaction between them. The nude sequence after Ivan's beating, silent except for his agonized moans, suggests an act of succor rather than one of lovemaking. And the close up of Elsa's embittered face at the end of the sequence proves an accurate forecast of her future life.

In fact, there is only tension, misunderstanding and bitterness between the two of them for the duration of the film. She is too tired and too disapproving to share in Ivan's celebration the night his record is released. Ivan and Pedro conceal their participation in the ganja trade from her, then make jokes based on her ignorance of the real purpose of their "fishing" expeditions. It is only in Pedro's motherless son Rupert that Elsa finds a willing and needy recipient of her affection. In that farewell day at the beach, she is never even seen in the same frame with Ivan. He is left standing alone on the cay as Elsa and Pedro and Rupert, like a family trio, wave goodbye from their departing skiff.

Though often used, taken advantage of, and ignored, Elsa maintains her strength and determination throughout. Realizing that Rupert's illness will only recur indefinitely unless he receives adequate nutrition and that without resumption of the ganja trade this is impossible, knowing full well that Ivan's capture is the price of Rupert's recovery, she decides to appeal to her former guardian. Her bitter observation as she decides to take this step—"Every time I play, I lose"—reveals the extent to which she is aware of the contradictions of her own existence.

A more secondary female figure, but one of tremendous emotional force, is Ivan's aged mother. That she symbolizes the accumulated suffering of the race is conveyed not only through her performance but through the lyrics of "Rivers of Babylon" which play softly in the background during the entire sequence. As she is a paradigm of suffering, so she is also a paradigm of wisdom. She urges Ivan to return to the country. But when she realizes the extent of his determination, she calmly predicts, to Ivan's great distress, his inevitable outcome, saying that without a job he is certain to become a "criminal."

Such powerful ironies give great strength to the story line, indicating on yet another level the film's mastery and control. As Ivan is tried, sentenced, stripped, bound, and beaten, a solemn judicial voice intones:

"You have had every chance to make good. You have been taken into the Church and given a chance to lead a good Christian life. Instead of that you have filled your head with foolishness and violence."

Detective Ray Jones, interrogating the most sad eyed and downtrodden of the ganja traders, asks in an incredulous rage, referring of course to Ivan,

"Since when does another dirty criminal like yourself mean more to you than *me*?"

But if Jones succeeds in making the ganja traders squirm, he in turn wriggles under the keen observations of Hilton, the most clear minded and cognizant of the oppressors. Hilton tells Jones, unabashed,

"Of course, I'm interested in the ganja trade. This is the only thing that brings money into this area ... Once these jokers

get hungry enough to start trading without you, then you are finished. Then law and order is finished in this whole area. You understand that, don't you?"

It is through this use of narrative irony, as well as through the interaction of song, storyline and image, that the awareness of the viewer of the film is made to exceed that of its protagonist.

Perhaps the best way to close this article is with a reference to two instantaneous cuts buried somewhere after the middle of the film. Both are stills of the printed word, which flash on the screen during one of the many sequences in which the police attempt unsuccessfully to track Ivan through the shanty town maze. The first, in bold and well shaped letters, counsels, "Skip town. Fly Pan Am to New York." The second, a hasty scrawl, proclaims, "I am everywhere."

Each statement demands to be understood in ironic counterpoint to the other. The first underlines the insularity of Ivan's plight, the fact that he is indeed trapped on that island without means of escape. But his proclamation is a reply to the mocking mobility of the affluent, for his rebellion—misguided though it is—his search for freedom from oppressions and his rightful share of the human estate, is more ubiquitous than the mighty Pan American machine. Ivan is—and Ivans are—everywhere that economic and cultural oppression breed them. Their rebellions will not always be a dead end.

Notes:

[1.](#) The history of the filming, the intentions and background of the filmmakers, the sources of financial backing, the social contexts within which the film has been viewed and the audience response to it are all questions directly related to my interpretation of the film. Such information is, however, extremely difficult to find and may, in the short run, tend to substantiate a much more pessimistic and negative view of the film's content. Perry Henzell is after all a son of Jamaica's white ruling class, though he perceives himself as much more closely tied to the marginal milieu portrayed in the film.

The story line fuses elements of Jimmy Cliff's own life with the history of Rhygin, a Rastafarian outlaw and folk hero ruthlessly pursued by the Jamaican police some years ago. The story was shaped to accommodate what Henzell considered to be some of the foremost reggae tunes, and not vice versa. Numerous members of the cast played themselves on their own turf; others came from another part of town, but none are professional actors. Hilton, for example is an insurance salesman in real life. Pedro is played by Raz Daniel Hartman, a well-known artist and sculptor.

A *Rolling Stone* account claims that when the film premiered in an elegant section of east Kingston, the theater was virtually stormed by "rude boys" from the shanty towns who crammed in three to a seat and were dancing in the aisles long before Ivan finally gets gunned down in

the final scene. Such a response suggests that the immediate impact of the film medium might be stronger than its message, that the experience of seeing their lives portrayed on a screen might initially be perceived as an unqualified justification rather than a call to critical appraisal. Less important, but still troublesome, is the fact that, for Jimmy Cliff at least, Ivan's example might seem irrelevant, for the film has certainly served him as a vehicle for making it big outside of Jamaica.

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The History Book A new look at history from the bottom up

by John Hess

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THE HISTORY BOOK (produced by Li Vilstrup and Jannik Hastrup; distributed by Tricontinental Film center) is a nine-part cartoon history of the world from the middle ages to the present. A Marxist history lesson, it shows the key historical developments from the point of view of the people rather than that of the kings, queens, bankers and generals who profited from the others' hard work. The major dialectical movement from feudalism through mercantilism to capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism is clearly shown and explained. A humorous rat, a constant observer of these developments, narrates much of the history which is acted out by colorful cartoon characters. Paintings, lithographs, maps and, toward the end, still photographs and documentary footage are also used to add color and authenticity to the fast-paced account of our history.

We see the development of the following historical developments

- trade in Europe
- the colonization of Africa by Portugal and the rest of Europe
- the titanic struggle between the merchants and the landowners (fought, of course, by peasants and workers)
- the development of the state
- the slave trade and its vicious effects on the slaves and the disastrous effect on Africa
- early industrialization
- the development of finance capital and how this leads inevitably to economic crises (as we well know today)
- the development of socialism, imperialism, the world wars, neo-colonialism, and the third world liberation struggles (in the latter parts, six through nine).

Surprisingly, the film was made for the Danish school system by the Danish Government Film Office. It's hard to imagine U.S. schools using

a film which validates a socialist conception of world history. Even liberal ideas about morality and religion draw vicious denunciations in many parts of the country. Although the film will be kept out of most schools, it can and will be used in all kinds of political education—in colleges, unions, community and political groups.

The first six or seven parts are particularly good for this use since they present clear, precise analyses of historical developments. At the same time, they give understandable explanations of Marxist concepts such as capitalism, class struggle, imperialism, exploitation, and colonialism. For example, the film clearly shows how urban congestion, the slave trade, and depressions are necessary aspects of capitalism. The film makes it clear why capitalism, even at its best, cannot exist without exploitation of workers, expansion of markets (the cause of imperialism) and periodic crises (depressions). This basic understanding must precede the effective struggle for a better organization of human potential and society.

THE HISTORY BOOK has two serious problems which do not, however, invalidate the film. But they should be taken into consideration when the film is screened. First, the film's intellectual level and thus its possible audience changes drastically from the beginning to the end. The first five or six parts could be used in elementary schools; the last four or five parts could not be so used. In the early parts the filmmakers assume no special knowledge of either history or of the basic historical and economic concepts. They very patiently explain and demonstrate the main points.

In the latter parts, perhaps because of the availability of documentary footage, and definitely because of the filmmakers' own partisan emotional involvement in certain third world struggles, the filmmakers assume much greater knowledge of history and current affairs and begin to speak to the already convinced. The whole film would have been much better, much more coherent and useful, had they resisted the temptation to use documentary footage and the desire to advocate their own particular narrow political interest. In spite of this flaw, all nine parts of THE HISTORY BOOK are interesting, engaging, and very informative. Its use will stimulate valuable discussion within any group and strengthen people's knowledge of the world's development.

The second problem involves the filmmakers' advocacy in the later parts of the film of an uncritical third worldism. The position that the third world liberation struggles are the center of, the heart of, the cutting edge of "The Revolution" distorts Marxism's demand for an internationalist perspective and often leads to the uncritical support of nationalist bourgeois elements in these countries. At the same time the advocates of this position tend to ignore the significant struggles of the industrial proletariat in the Western capitalist countries and also tend to condemn Russian socialism out of hand. Alain Tanner's RETURN FROM AFRICA articulately counters this tendency on the part of many European and U.S. radical intellectuals. We cannot, Tanner's film says, live vicariously

through the experience and struggles of third world revolutionaries. We must, instead, become involved in the more mundane and tiresome struggles here at home.

In any case, this bias in the film by no means invalidates it. But the bias does present problems. Anyone using the film should realize that its perspective is debatable and highly controversial. When the later parts of the film are shown, this perspective should become one of the main topics of discussion. All in all, THE HISTORY BOOK is a fascinating experiment in making educational films. I hope many more truly educational films will follow it and that we will begin to make similar films here.

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King Kong Race, sex, and rebellion

by David N. Rosen

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It's clear that a central aspect in the critical analysis of a film (or any work of art) must be an appreciation of its historicity. This principle is based on the assumption that the film and its meaning reflect the cultural environment of its time and place. To be aware of the historicity of a given film, then, requires some awareness of the specific complex of factors—social, political, economic, psychological, etc.—informing the sensibilities of artists and audiences at the time of the film's creation and initial presentation.

An interesting effort along these lines is Gerald Peary's "A Speculation: The Historicity of KING KONG" (JUMP CUT, 4), which interprets the giant ape Kong as a conservative RKO's very skeptical symbolic assessment of the New Deal, with the adventurer-promoter character Denham representing FDR. I believe, however, that a historical appreciation of the film should be expanded to include some other themes, those of race, sex, and rebellion. I say "expand" because I don't believe it necessary to "refute" Peary's interpretation in order to present this one. Symbols can be overdetermined, that is, represent more than one idea.

It doesn't require too great an exercise of the imagination to perceive the element of race in KING KONG. Racist conceptions of blacks often depict them as subhuman, ape or monkey-like. And consider the plot of the film: Kong is forcibly taken from his jungle home, brought in chains to the United States, where he is put on stage as a freak entertainment attraction. He breaks his chains and goes on a rampage in the metropolis, until finally he is felled by the forces of law and order.

The causative factor in his capture and his demise is his fatal attraction to blonde Ann Darrow (Fay Wray). As Denham says in the last words of the film, "Oh, no, it wasn't the airplanes. It was Beauty killed the Beast." If we look at KING KONG in terms of a racial metaphor, "Beauty" turns out to be "the white woman." This kind of theme is foreshadowed in the

behavior of the “natives” on the island where Kong is captured. When he first sees her, the “Native Chief” offers six of his wives for Ann, and when this is refused, he kidnaps her. Thus the sequence of events leading to Kong’s capture is set in motion: the romantic lead, hero of the film, Jack Driscoll (Bruce Cabot) and Denham organize a rescue party.

This type of plot device is a recurrent element in films of the jungle adventure genre. The white woman comes along on the safari not only to provide romantic interest. She is usually a focus of tension between the white males and the “natives,” furnishing an opportunity for some of the former to display their virile heroism against the savages. An alternate scenario involves the search for a legendary white woman reportedly living among an obscure, remote tribe, for example, *TRADER HORN* (MGM 1931). In both cases the “natives” view the white woman as a special kind of fetish with magical powers. In those instances where the white woman isn't fetishized by the “natives,” the very opposite treatment of her provides an index of their barbarity—they lack a special standard of mercy for women characteristic of civilized peoples.

Aside from the sexual aspect implicit in the question of race, there's the more direct, and somewhat delirious, sexual imagery in the film. The ape often functions as a most appropriate anthropoid symbol of “lower,” “animal” instincts. In this case we have a giant ape (literally a huge, hairy monster) and his unrestrained, headlong pursuit of a “blonde,” that archetypical Hollywood sex-object, ending on top of the world's foremost phallic symbol.⁽¹⁾ The sexual theme touches on the standard racist myth of the black male's exaggerated sexual potency, and the complementary notion of his insatiable desire for white women.

As stated above, to locate these interpretations in a historical context requires that we ask questions about the specific events and trends influencing the attitudes of the film's creators and audience. A survey of the post World War I period in the United States or, for our purposes, the fifteen years between the end of the war and the release of *KING KONG* in 1933, reveals a period of increasing racial and social tension.

During the war period the movement of blacks from rural to urban areas intensified, and migration continued through the 1920s, resulting in increased racial friction in the cities. In 1919 numerous race riots broke out, the most well-known being that which began in Chicago in July 27. What was most significant about these riots was their widespread occurrence (six major riots, twenty other racial disturbances in the summer and fall of 1919) and the fact that blacks were fighting back, as indicated by the Chicago statistics on number of whites killed and injured, which is cited as a major factor in accounting for the particularly violent character of the riots.⁽²⁾

The Ku Klux Klan greatly expanded its membership in the twenties, with its biggest gains in the growing southwestern and midwestern cities; in 1922 Chicago had the most Klan members of any city.⁽³⁾ Miscegenation, of course, was and continued to be an *idée fixe* with the Klan and white

racism in general, the protection of white women viewed as a major part of the task of saving “white civilization.” Although the wave of rabid racism may be considered to have abated somewhat in the late twenties, it is incontestable that the nation was still affected by the same racial preoccupations. In March of 1931 the infamous Scottsboro Boys case began, in which nine black youths were accused of raping two white girls.

The Depression hit blacks, traditionally last hired, first fired, especially hard. Blacks played a prominent and highly visible role in the hunger marches to Washington which took place in December, 1931 and 32, and in the Bonus March to Washington of July 1932. In the election of that year black voters decisively broke away from the Republican party of emancipation’ to vote for Roosevelt.

It should be noted that the popular cultural representations of the twenties and thirties continued to present the Sambo character and the minstrel tradition, exemplified by Stepin Fetchit on the one hand, and Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor on the other. In other words, blacks were presented as the stereotypical good natured, fearful, stupid, lazy characters who loved to dance and sing, and who provided laughs and entertainment for white audiences.

The image of King Kong on a Broadway stage may correspond very closely to white America’s attitudes toward the black men in the 1930s: an object of entertainment, but also of fear. The ape is apparently securely chained, but with the ever present potential for bursting his chains and wreaking violence and destruction with all the power of his supposed “savage” primitive nature.

KING KONG was released a few days before Roosevelt’s inauguration in March of 1933, the high point of the Depression in terms of number of unemployed. If this period of intense capitalist crisis clearly raised the possibility of revolution, in a general sense it can be argued that Kong symbolizes this possibility, the threat of the masses “losing their chains” in a revolutionary upheaval—which conservatives always picture as a strictly chaotic, wantonly destructive dissolution of society. It should be remembered that this threat was not new; it had been haunting the capitalist world with particular intensity since the end of the war.

A revolutionary wave had swept through Europe beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917, with soviet republics briefly established in Germany and Hungary in 1919, and all of Eastern and Central Europe in the throes of revolutionary ferment. The reaction in the United States to these events and increased working-class militancy at home was the postwar “Red Scare,” which coincided with the outburst of racism.

The Palmer raids of 1920 were unambiguously directed against “alien elements,” especially southern and eastern European immigrants who were thought to be the carriers of the “Bolshevik” virus. (4) If these immigrants were the carriers of the disease, other racial and ethnic minorities such as blacks, Mexicans, and Orientals were thought to be

highly susceptible. In a popular racist tract published in 1920, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White Supremacy*, Theodore Lothrop Stoddard warned”

“In every quarter of the globe ... the Bolshevik agitators whisper in the ears of discontented colored men their gospel of hatred and revenge. Every nationalist aspiration, every political grievance, every social discrimination, is fuel for Bolshevism’s hellish incitement to racial as well as to class war.” (5)

Attorney-General Palmer’s antiradical division, headed by J. Edgar Hoover, saw fit to publish a pamphlet in the fall of 1919 on “Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications.”

The Communist Party, was later very much involved with black causes, such as the American Negro Labor Congress established in 1925. The International Labor Defense formed by the CP devoted a great deal of attention to black cases, most notably the Scottsboro Boys case.

What’s important here in terms of this analysis is not so much the actual amount of Communist activity among U.S. blacks as the degree to which the government and media of communication fostered this conception and reinforced it. In popular opinion, the Scottsboro Boys case in particular was one of the biggest stories of its day. No doubt it played on and contributed to the linking of a series of ideas about race, miscegenation, communism, etc. in sectors of the American consciousness. In other words, it touched on those very thoughts and fears which, as this article has argued, form the latent content of KING KONG.

The movement for “100 per cent Americanism” was directed against all those “alien elements” which were seen to threaten “American civilization.” Seen in this light, the choice of location for the finale of KING KONG is especially appropriate. What better monument to this “civilization” was there in 1933 than the then only recently completed Empire State Building? According to one source, an alternate location considered for this scene of Kong’s destruction was Yankee Stadium! (6)

As mentioned previously—a whole genre of Hollywood films (and TV serials) have been devoted to the jungle adventure theme. An examination of the relationship of these films to the question of race in the United States would probably make an interesting and illuminating study. What may be of significance for the analysis presented here is that the directors of KING KONG, Merien C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, were important figures in the development of this genre.

The explorer-showman-entrepreneur character Denham in KING KONG actually bears a strong resemblance to Merian Cooper. Cooper and Schoedsack had made a name for themselves with the exotic documentary footage of their two previous films, GRASS (1925) and CHANG (1927). GRASS followed the migration of a primitive Persian

tribe while CHANG depicted a family's struggle for survival in the jungles of Laos. These films strongly influenced the production of later African adventure epics such as TRADER HORN, the Tarzan and Frank Buck films, both because of their popularity and in terms of the technical and aesthetic examples they set. Cameramen Schoedsack's action footage of wildlife, such as the low-angle shots of stampeding elephants taken from a pit, illustrates this. The team later filmed in Africa for THE FOUR FEATHERS (1929) and went to India to do parts of LIVES OF A BENGAL LANCER (1935).

Merian Cooper is an intriguing character in still another way. In 1927 he invested heavily in aviation stock and eventually went on to be elected a director of Pan American airlines. He was a supporter of General Billy Mitchell's drive for increased air power and, as the saying goes, was a "staunch anticommunist." In 1919 he had volunteered to fight the Bolsheviks as a flyer in Poland's Kosciuszko Squadron, was shot down behind the front lines in July of 1920, and was imprisoned in Russia for ten months before escaping.⁽⁷⁾ Later he produced a number of films in Hollywood, doing a few with John Ford.

Cooper's interest in airplanes no doubt had something to do with the very striking finale of KING KONG. In a less obvious way, his political orientation may have figured in this story's depiction of a monstrous threat to "American civilization" and its final destruction.

In conclusion, it should be understood that an historical appreciation of the problem of symbolism and meaning, i.e., the recognition that meanings and the reaction to images (historically) change with changes in audience sensibilities, implies no fixation on a work of art's original milieu as the only basis for a "genuine" or "authentic" estimation of it. Such a fixation actually constitutes a one-sided distortion of a historical approach, of value only to antiquarians and pedants. Examination of present-day audience reactions to older films is no less necessary or valid. But what's especially interesting about an interpretation of a film like KING KONG in terms of its historicity is how our more recent experience enables us to retrieve and appreciate its "original" meaning and compare it with our own understanding of it. The racial conflagrations of the 1960s, the resurgence of a radical movement in the United States, and the deepening social—and now economic—crisis stimulate and make possible such an understanding. More recently, of course, we have also been sold some new improved metaphors for social and economic crisis in the form of a capsized ocean liner, an earthquake, and a "Towering Inferno."

Notes:

1. The Hays Office censored what it considered the objectionable scenes in KING KONG, which included one sequence on the island where Kong gently tears Ann's clothes off, strokes her with his finger, and then sniffs it. See "King Kong Was a Dirty Old Man," *Esquire* (September 1971). pp. 146-9 for stills of this sequence.

[2.](#) Stanley Cohen, "The Failure of the Melting Pot." *The Great Fear: Race in the Mind of America*. ed. Gary B. Nash and Richard Weiss. (New York, 1970), p. 146. Cohen comments on the riots in the following terms: "... race riots were not a new phenomenon in United States history. But never had riots been even remotely as widespread or as violent on both sides as in 1919." (p. 148, fn. 7).

[3.](#) Ibid., pp. 156. 159.

[4.](#) The word *bolshevik* is in quotes here because during the Red Scare it was often used rather loosely, in a pejorative way, rather than in a precise ideological sense.

[5.](#) Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (New York, 1920), p. 220, as quoted by Cohen, p. 155.

[6.](#) Chris Steinbrunner and Burt Goldblatt, *Cinema of the Fantastic* (New York, 1972). p.52.

[7.](#) Rudy Behlmet, "Merian C. Cooper." *Films in Review*. 17:1 (January 1966), p. 18.

Paul Rotha's *Documentary Diary* Politics of the British documentary

by William Guynn

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The appearance of Paul Rotha's *Documentary Diary* (Hill & Wang, 1972) affords a new opportunity to evaluate the British documentary film. The British documentary has, over the years, maintained its reputation as the only long-lived political movement in cinema to succeed the revolutionary Soviet films of the 20s. Even today it is viewed as a cinema of social protest, an expression of the mass movements of the 30s depression, as the cinema which finally gave an honorable place in its films to the worker. And yet, despite its avowedly political character, this movement has been subjected to very little political analysis. Film historians have uncritically catalogued its achievements, without defining its political nature. Political filmmakers, such as Joris Evens, have chided its "softness"; formalist critics have condemned its aesthetic poverty.

The major questions remain to be answered. Why did the movement arise at a given moment in history and how and why was it sustained for more than fifteen years? These questions need to be answered because the history of the British documentary film poses the problem of the relation between the artist and class society in the age of decadent capitalism. The British movement is of interest to us because the British documentarists took the wrong road—leading them artistically to mediocrity and politically to class collaboration.

Paul Rotha's *Documentary Diary* is the intimate history of the British documentary film, written by one of its filmmakers and chief theoreticians. It evokes that period between 1930 and 1939 when the British documentarists, headed by John Grierson, came together in collective film units under government, sponsorship and produced, on shoestring budgets, a seemingly endless stream of films intended to revolutionize the art of cinema. As Rotha states,

"Up till 1940, there was only one real coherent movement in the young art of cinema which was destined to have an influence on western filmmaking ... that was the movement

of documentary filmmaking in Britain in the 1930s.”
(*Documentary Diary*, p. xiii)

Ironically, the impact of the British documentary on film as art has been practically negligible. What the British formed was in essence a political not an artistic school.

There was no consistent artistic theory underlying the movement; the film art was to be used as a means to a political end. Hence the films themselves reveal a multitude of influences. And they are made in several styles: documentary montage (Soviet cinema), documentary re-enactment and dramatization (Flaherty), “symphonic” avant-gardism (Cavalcanti, Ruttmann), and journalistic documentary (newsreels, *MARCH OF TIME*). The theoreticians of the movement were unable to define exactly what documentary film was. We are left with Grierson’s formulation, which has more resonance than meaning, “the creative interpretation of actuality.” As Alan Lowell points out in *Studies in Documentary*,

“The importance of the documentary movement lies, not in the quality of individual films, but in the impact it had in general on the British cinema.” (Viking Press, p. 35)

If the films have been dismissed by subsequent generations of filmmakers, the legend of the movement remains, and it has never been seriously challenged.

Rotha’s diary—a collection of reminiscences, anecdotes, private letters and documents—gives us many insights into the internal life of the British movement. He chronicles the hand-to-mouth existence the documentarists lived in their struggle to secure from government agencies and private industry the financial backing for their film productions. The film units’ existence, particularly during the lean years of the depression, was precarious and strife-ridden. Not surprisingly, it was sustained primarily by political maneuvering and bureaucratic backroom deals. As Rotha puts it,

“It is important to realize that against the EMB and GPO [The Empire Marketing Board and the General Post office were the government agencies with which the documentary movement was affiliated] and what they stood for in the 1930s, there was woven this skein of intrigue and maneuver which most of the documentary filmmakers themselves, intent on their creative work in production, were unaware of.” (p. 122)

Whether the individual filmmakers were conscious of it or not, this intense struggle for survival was instrumental in imposing on the British documentary its particular political character. The documentarists found themselves forced to compromise, both artistically and politically. Grierson, as head of the movement and chief negotiator, made it clear from the outset that the film unit was directly tied to the state and that

“treasury money, and opportunity to make any films at all, were entirely conditioned by these commissions to be served.”

He further warned against any subversion of this purpose by artists with

“their enthusiasm for cinema, for art, for self-expression and other beautiful what-nots ...” (*Grierson on Documentary*, University of California Press, p. 164)

The British documentary film was not, then, the simple voice of social protest; despite its claims, it was no worker’s cinema of class struggle. As I will attempt to show, it served, rather, the interests of capitalism during a period of the potentially revolutionary upsurge of the masses. It arose and was formed on the political battlefield of Britain after World War I. In order to understand the political significance of the British documentary film, it is necessary to examine its political roots.

World War I officially inaugurated what Lenin called the “epoch of wars and revolution.” Capitalist society had entered the age of imperialism characterized by the domination of the monopolies over competitive capitalism, the merging of finance capital (the banks) with industrial capital, the export of capital by international monopolies, and the complete division of the world among the strongest imperialist nations (Lenin: *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*). Britain had been the most highly developed capitalist nation of the 19th century, with a colonial empire of unparalleled wealth. In World War I, Britain attempted to maintain its world hegemony, its colonies, and spheres of influence against its rival imperialist power, Germany. It emerged from the war victorious in name, but in reality profoundly weakened. As the oldest capitalist power, Britain suffered from its own history. Its level of technology and organization of the productive forces were antiquated by comparison with the younger industrialized nations, in particular the United States. Coal—at the basis of British industry—was quickly being supplanted by the superior power of electricity, characteristic of industry in the United States.

In addition, the British colonies, in particular Canada and Australia, were achieving a high level of self-sufficiency, both industrially and politically. National movements in India, Egypt, and the East were further indications that England was rapidly losing its position as the metropolitan and industrial center of its empire. Furthermore, the so-called pacification of Europe which followed the war all but guaranteed the rebirth of German capital as a severe threat to the maintenance of British hegemony.

In his analysis of the British situation in 1926, Leon Trotsky summarized its social development in this way:

“In the past the British bourgeoisie had by oppressing the toilers and plundering the colonies led the nation on the path

of material growth and thus guaranteed its rule. Today the bourgeois regime is not only incapable of leading the British nation forward but neither can it maintain for it the level already achieved.” (*Problems of the British Revolution*, New Park Publications, p. 26)

Britain’s position as the leading capitalist power of the 19th century to a large extent determined the character of the British working class. As Lenin observed, imperialism, because of the super-profits it squeezes from its own workers and from the plunder of the entire world, is able to create privileged sections of workers, to encourage opportunism among them, and to stifle, if only temporarily, the militancy of the working class movement.

Hence Engels was able to say in a letter to Marx (October 7, 1858):

“The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming ultimately at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy, and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie.” (quoted by Lenin in *Imperialism*)

It is significant in this regard that, although the British trade union movement was well advanced and had managed to extract numerous concessions from the bourgeoisie, it was late, by comparison with continental neighbors, in producing a political party of the working class independent of the bourgeois parties. Until the turn of the century, the working class was represented in parliament only by a half-dozen Lib-Labs (“labouring” men elected on the Liberal ticket).

The ideological development of the British proletariat was further retarded by its dependence on the Fabian bourgeois. The Fabian Society, organized in 1883, was a group of intellectuals, among them Bernard Shaw, which preached reformism and served as the ideological cover for opportunism in the British labor movement. Its principal thesis was that the British working class could gradually and peacefully worm its way into power. Presumably, the working class could capture parliament through the “democratic” process, subsequently control the means of production by a gradual extension of state ownership and transform the existing state into an instrument for public welfare. The British Labour Party, through its right wing (MacDonald and Thomas), was thoroughly nourished by Fabian reaction and largely adopted its ideology.

In contradistinction to the Communist strategy—“workers of the world, unite”—the social democratic British Labour Party attempted to link the destiny of the British working class with that of the British bourgeoisie by promulgating the notion that the capitalist state was reformable and could be forced to act in the interest of the proletariat. On the eve of imperialist war, which could only bring death, impoverishment and misery to the working class, the British Labour Party called for the patriotic defense of the fatherland. It was at this decisive historic moment, as the parties of the Second International embraced the

politics of social patriotism, that Lenin broke from their ranks and called for the creation of the Third (communist) International.

The British Labour Party, which contained great numbers of subjectively revolutionary elements, was, in the final analysis, dominated by its right wing. The right wing had the distinct advantage of a thoroughly consistent program based on the strong national bourgeois ideology: for tradition and experience, for the nation, for the maintenance of the ruling class. It became the historic role of this party, during the war and in the subsequent misery of the depression, to organize the betrayal of the working class and to bring to the proletariat the ideas of the bourgeoisie.

As Britain entered the era of the 30s and the great depression, the situation of the British proletariat was desperate. The British bourgeoisie, weakened by war, bogged down by its own industrial conservatism, outstripped by both German and U.S. capitalism, was quite incapable of granting any concession to its working class. As a measure of the depth of the coming crisis, one needs only to note that by the mid-20s, Britain's key industry, coalmining, was unable to pay its workers without a subsidy from the state. In response to their own economic collapse, the capitalists began a counterattack, hoping to lay the burden of crisis on the backs of the proletariat.

The social democratic British Labour Party, which constituted the leadership of labor, immediately began to give ground, surrendering without a struggle reforms and concessions which had previously been extracted from the capitalist class. The social democrats recognized that, given the bankruptcy of the capitalist system, to struggle in this period for significant politico or even economic gains would pose before the proletariat the question of the conquest of state power. As Trotsky observed in 1925:

“There is not a single question of economic life: the nationalization of the mines, and the railways, the fight against unemployment, free trade or protectionism, housing and so on which does not lead directly to the question of power.” (*Problems of the British Revolution*, p. 26)

The social democrats—created by capitalism and destined to perish with it—were forced by history to attempt to defend the existing order. At this critical moment, the masses were confronted with their historic task of the revolutionary overthrow of the bourgeois order with no revolutionary vanguard to lead them. Instead, they were tied to a social democratic labor aristocracy, the “lieutenants of capital in the working class” (Lenin), which would stand at every point as an obstacle to revolution.

It was in the historic context of the intensification of class struggle in Britain in the 1930s that the British documentary was born. As a political movement in film, its outlook was social democratic. This is not difficult to prove. Grierson, the organizing force of the movement, is

quite specific in defining its origins:

“Documentary was born and nurtured on the bandwagon of uprising social democracy everywhere ...” (Preface to Rotha’s *Documentary Film*, Faber & Faber, p. 16)

This does not mean that the British documentary was directly affiliated with the British Labour Party. On the contrary, the documentarists complained with some bitterness about the lack of support from the laborites. Ironically, they were forced to seek sponsorship from the right-wing Tory government. This sponsorship was a source of embarrassment, since it exposed the bourgeois character of the documentary movement. As Grierson states, with uncomfortable good humor:

“I like to put it ironically by saying that I have enjoyed a more radical conception of documentary and a richer, more imaginative, sponsorship free the Tories than I have from those who have been thought to be by brothers-in-arms [the social democrats].” (*Grierson on Documentary*, p. 16)

It is nonetheless true that the British documentary movement adopted as its own the ideology of social democracy. The documentarists’ films were destined for a working class audience, but they were produced by the capitalist state or by the capitalists themselves. As Lenin pointed out, social democracy represented an historically developed ideology through which the bourgeoisie communicated with the proletariat. Caught in the class forces of depression Britain, the documentarists did not so much choose social democracy as they were an historical product of that movement. Although individual filmmakers, such as Rotha, occasionally moved to the left in response to the militancy of the working class, they were irresistibly drawn, under the pressure of bourgeois sponsorship, to defend the existing order.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to present the major components of the documentary ideology and their relationship to the politics of social democracy. I will place special emphasis on Rotha’s and Grierson’s contributions, as they were the political theoreticians of the movement. Rotha was the left face of British documentary and its more serious thinker. As such, he felt impelled to reconcile the movement’s burning contradictions. Grierson, on the other hand, was the movement’s right wing, its essence, a bureaucrat who did not hesitate to assert, for example, that the “socialist” revolution had somehow taken place in Britain in the 1950s (unknown to the British proletariat). The diverging of views is only apparent. The British documentary’s political program was thoroughly consistent.

The documentarists, in particular Rotha as left pole, were faced with the task of resolving the obvious contradiction between the “proletarian” orientation of the documentary and its subservience to bourgeois sponsorship and control. In seeking to reconcile the irreconcilable, Rotha is inevitably forced to deny the class character of the state. The

documentarists, like the Fabian social democrats, subscribe to the idea that the state (the army, the police, the parliamentary, judicial and executive bureaucratic apparatus), rather than being an instrument by which one class maintains domination over another, is a structure through which class antagonisms can be reconciled.

In *The German Ideology* Marx combats the idealist, Hegelian conception of the state as standing above class divided society. He asserts that, on the contrary, the state exists precisely *because* of class oppression:

“[The state] is nothing more than the form of organization which the bourgeoisie necessarily adopts both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interests” (International Publishers, p. 80).

It is this erroneous conception of a classless state which is at the root of the politics of the British documentary film, and on this foundation the documentarists formulated their ideas of film as a force for social transformation.

In his analysis of the social aspects of documentary film (*Documentary Film*, 1936), Rotha propounds the idealist view of the relation between society and the state, and on it he builds a “strategy” for the salvation of the working class. This strategy follows, in fact, the scenario developed by the Fabians for the peaceful seizure of power, except that Rotha’s version grants a key role to documentary film. Rotha notes first, with a symptomatic note of fear, that Britain is in a period of massive social upheaval in which there is a singular “lack of collective enthusiasm” (in the form of militant strikes and mass disenchantment with the state). He observes, with something more than British understatement, that “present methods of ordering society are in some cases proving inadequate ...” (p. 47) In order to eradicate social upheaval, Rotha suggests that, since “democracy” has been mismanaged by the greedy few, the “ordinary citizen” must step in and save Britain by returning it to the control of the majority:

“.. it rests with the ordinary person to act not merely as a passive voter but as an active member of the state. His political cooperation, criticism and even active opposition is demanded and he must be intelligently equipped to meet that demand.” (p. 48)

Hence Rotha propagates the Fabian myth that state control of the economy can cure the national economic disaster and consequently alleviate the misery of the masses. His assertion is based on the supposition that the state is an impartial body which belongs to the whole people and through which, by democratic means, the working class can control the greedy impulses of capital. Rotha not only denies the class nature of the state but also implies that crises, instead of being an integral part of the capitalist economic cycle, can be eliminated without the overthrow of capital itself. Obviously the documentarists’

idea of social transformation had nothing to do with revolution. What they proposed was a scheme—and an unrealistic one—for returning the nation to the conditions of “healthy” capitalism.

The problem is (the scenario continues) that the working class is not “intelligently equipped.” That is, it has suffered from a class-biased educational system. Hence, it has been prevented through ignorance and consequent apathy from taking its proper place in the mechanism of bourgeois democracy. This is the fault not only of the educational institutions but also of the mass media, which are in the hands of industry and serve to lead the public down the primrose path. Rotha concludes that cinema, “one of the most influential factors in the guidance, of public thought,” must be liberated from capitalist trade control so that it may participate in the “economic and morel regeneration of the world.” (p. 57) In this scheme of things, how is cinema to achieve its liberation? Through what Rotha calls propaganda:

“By adopting propaganda as an alternative basis of production, not only might cinema serve the greatest possible purposes as a medium, but production might enter into a freedom impossible to entertainment film.” (p. 59)

The obvious models of liberated cinema are the EMB and GPO film units. Hence, propaganda is to be produced for the state, which, since it is not class dominated, is capable of creating an educational instrument for the liberation of the oppressed classes. In *State and Revolution* Lenin exposes the reality of this kind of “democratic” fantasy:

“The petty bourgeois democrats, those sham socialists who have replaced class struggle by dreams of class harmony, even pictured the socialist transformation in a dreamy fashion—not as the overthrow of the rule of the exploiting class, but as the peaceful submission of the minority to the majority which has become conscious of its aims. This petty-bourgeois utopia, which is inseparably connected with the idea of the state being above classes, led in practice to the betrayal of the toiling classes.” (*Selected Works*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1970, pp. 303-4)

According to Rotha’s political theory, documentary film liberated itself from capitalism by allying itself with the “impartial” state. And yet, strangely enough, Rotha and the documentarists did not disapprove of sponsorship by industry. In fact, they sought it out, as the Shell Film Unit’s 17-year existence proves. One can legitimately wonder what exactly constitutes British documentary’s independence from capitalism. Rotha gives us the following answer: What is essential in determining the ideology of cinema is not the ideological message it communicates nor the political forces which act on it, but simply the process by which it is produced. The “entertainment” film is produced in the capitalist manner, in emulation of “modern manufacture.” That is, it is a commodity produced on a large scale and for profit. The documentarists’ films, on the other hand, are created in a “collective”

manner through the cooperative effort of individual filmmakers.

This simplistic reasoning—which characterizes most “independent” filmmakers in this country who think of themselves as “political”—explains Rotha’s excessive hostility to Hollywood. On the basis of this analysis, Rotha quite easily dismisses Hollywood as political and artistic “whoredom” and those critics who appreciate Hollywood film, as the equivalent of “partly educated teenagers flashing swastikas and cloth iron crosses.” It is of course undeniable that Hollywood films as a whole are infused with bourgeois ideology and that the filmmaker is subject to political and artistic constraints. But to counterpose to the “entertainment” film the capitalist- or state-sponsored propaganda film as a model of “free” cinema is absurd. The irony is that cinema directly controlled by industrial sponsorship or by the state must submit to the most direct kind of political interference. And this is what Rotha’s *Documentary Diary* eloquently confirms.

The social democrats and the documentarists shared an ambivalent—in reality, hostile—attitude toward the world communist movement. As Engels observed in a letter to Karl Kautsky (September 4, 1892), the Taylor “socialists” are “united only by their fear of the threatening rule of the workers....” It was essential, however, for the social democrats, as they addressed the working class in time of crisis, to assume a left posture. This included an appreciation for far-away revolutionary movements, in particular for the Soviet workers’ state.

It was, at the same time, essential for the social democrats to make it clear that the lessons of the October revolution could never be applied to Britain. Consequently, they sought refuge in a theory of exoticism. The Russian revolution was simply a product of that country’s peculiar political traditions, ethnic collages and climes. Britain had its own enduring political forms and its national genius for “democracy.” The documentarists, like the social democrats, were fond of quoting Marx, and even Lenin, who had exposed social democracy for what it was. But they were, in fact, much fonder of Stalin, whose theory of “socialism in one country” obviated the international revolutionary perspective and, in a sense, validated the theory of exoticism. The social democrats, in their desperate desire to prove that workers are incapable of ruling society, took advantage of Stalinist reaction, i.e., that a bureaucratic caste had usurped the political power of the working class in the Soviet Union. In so doing, they ignored Russia’s profound social revolution and the socialized property forms which continued to exist, even under the political role of Stalin and his bureaucracy.

Grierson expresses it this way,

“..I do not believe that socialism as we have thought of it will come at all. That surely was plain when workers’ soviets with all their socialist dreams of workers’ control in a classless society were driven out of industrial management in Russia and Republican Spain, and by their own leaders” (*Grierson on Documentary*, p. 266).

In the domain of the arts, documentarists were, for the same reason, enamored of Stalin's policies. Grierson, who called the Soviet filmmakers the forerunners of documentary, was quick to disassociate himself and his movement from the early revolutionary period and its insistence on class war (POTEMKIN, THE END OF ST. PETERSBERG):

„.. the whole effect was hectic, and, in the last resort, romantic. In the first period of revolution the artists had not yet got down, like their neighbors, to themes of honest work.” (*Grierson on Documentary*, p. 151)

Grierson frankly condemns the early Bolshevik policy on art, which called for the independence of the artist, as a disastrous indulgence. He greeted the Stalinist policy of state censorship and artistic control with a sigh of relief.

“For the future, one may leave them [the Soviet filmmakers] safely to the consideration of the Central Committee” (*Grierson on Documentary*, p. 183).

In fact, Grierson pointed to the Stalinist policy of state interference in the arts as a model. With this gesture to the left, he justified his own thoroughly reactionary theory, which proposed the direct political appropriation of the cinematic art by the bourgeois state.

What Grierson, Rotha, and the documentarists counterposed to the dictatorship of the proletariat was the alternative of a “community” of classes, the obvious precondition of which is class peace. One of the principal propagandistic aims of the documentary movement was to “make peace exciting” (Grierson), i.e., to prevent the eruption of class struggle. Pacifism as an ideology is thoroughly reactionary in that it is directed, not at the purveyors of war, the capitalist class, but at the working masses, who are, as it is, disarmed, and who are daily subjugated by class violence. It was the mission of the Empire Marketing Board film unit to “bring the empire alive.” That is, it aimed to convey to the public the idea that British colonialism was developing into a benevolent venture that would bring the international working class and exploited peasantry into a harmonious cooperative relationship:

“Our original command of peoples was becoming slowly a cooperative effort in the tilling of soil, the reaping of harvests, and the organization of a world economy. For the old flags of exploitation it substituted the new flags of common labour.” (*Grierson on Documentary* pp. 165-6).

Grierson correctly points out that imperialism had created an international economy and an international division of labor. But what he obviously ignores is the colonial and class violence under which this “internationalism” functions. He ignores the crucial fact that, although the international working class does share the labor of production, it

does not produce for its own needs but for the profit of the bourgeoisie. Films such as Basil Wright's SONG OF CEYLON [1914], sponsored by the British Tea Consortium, are deliberate obfuscations of the burning issues of colonialism and class oppression.

This celebrated EMB-GPO production describes the cultural differences between do colonizer and colonized, the contrast between advanced capitalism (railroads) and mauve "backwardness" (elephants), the frenetic pace of British business versus the gentle manners of the Ceylonese—all of which are skillfully edited together. Montage, as the British documentarists understood it, did not present a world of conflict. Rather, it was a method for reconciling contradictions. Wright uses contrast, not conflict, and submerges the reality of colonial oppression in the primeval foliage and harmonious rituals of Ceylon.

On the home front, the documentarist worked for the maintenance of class peace and asked the British proletariat in the throes of the depression to "make an art from what we have ..." They consistently avoided raising any significant economic or political issues in their films since to do so in this period of profound crisis was to question the legitimacy of bourgeois rule. To evade the question of exploitation of labor, the documentarists portrayed the proletariat as existing in an economic and political vacuum.

This extremely circumscribed and depoliticized representation of reality often relied on the old symphonic style of the European avant-gardists of the 20s. The images of modern life are torn from their social context and delivered to us as abstractions. Typical subjects of the documentary are the beauty of men at work (INDUSTRIAL BRITAIN, Flaherty, 1933) or the heroism of the collective effort which makes the mechanism of industrial society function. It was as if the greatest task confronting the proletariat were to propel a train to the summit of the Scottish highlands, encouraged in verse by Auden and in music by Benjamin Britten (NIGHT MAIL, Basil Wright, Harry Watt, 1936). When the documentarists did address the social problems of the depression, they did so in a journalistic style so innocuous that the critical misery of the proletariat could be exposed by the Gas Company, sponsor of HOUSING PROBLEMS (Anstey & Elton, 1935)

In *Documentary Diary* Rotha ends his discussion of the documentary movement at the outbreak of World War 2. It was, Rotha asserts, the war which killed the documentary film. On the contrary, this was the period of its most successful integration into the state, the period of its flowering. The documentarists were at first so caught up in their own pacifist rhetoric that they did not see where opportunity lay. But after a short period of stagnation, due in part to the unenlightened policies of the Ministry of Information, government sponsorship of documentary began in earnest. The filmmakers could for the first time work without the sad task of having to "educate" government bureaucrats. The documentarists, collected into the Crown Film Unit and under the leadership of Alberto Cavalcanti, found themselves installed at

Pinewood studios with ample personnel and the latest equipment at their disposal.

World war 2 had come to fulfill Lenin's prediction of 1914:

"After this war, if a series of successful revolutions do not occur, more wars will follow—the fairy tale of a war to end all wars, is a hollow and pernicious fairy tale ..."

The social democrats, and in their wake the documentarists, came to the defense of the "fatherland," that is, to the defense of the interests and privileges of British imperialism. In the "struggle for democracy" against fascism, they seemed to have forgotten that it was the British government which had sided with Hitler in his rise to power. As Lenin had shown, the only answer to imperialist war is socialist revolution. The politics of the British documentary in this period were the politics of open class collaboration. Instead of proposing a working class offensive against imperialism, it attempted to defeat class consciousness and to tie the British proletariat to its class enemy.

It was perhaps Humphrey Jennings' films which best exemplified the documentary spirit during the war years. While other documentarists were realizing film's potential as an arm of military technology (training and technical films, reconnaissance films, etc.), Jennings became the "humanist" poet of war. In *LETTER TO BRITAIN* (1941), perhaps his best known film, Jennings uses montage as a cinematic structure which reconciles in an imaginary construct the antagonistic interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. He orchestrates a "symphony" of Britain at war, the music of armament factories, dance halls, transport trains, and the concert at the National Gallery where the Queen Mother and proletarian war widows listen to Myra Hess play Mozart.

The history of British documentary film provides an illustration of cinema's predicament in the epoch of decaying capitalism. As a mass art, cinema is extremely influential in the development of mass ideology. It is also the most susceptible of all art to bourgeois domination. It needs capital in order to exist as an art form. Diego Rivera and André Breton, in their "Manifesto: Toward a Free Revolutionary Art," *Partisan Review*, Autumn, 1935), quote the young Marx as saying:

"The writer naturally must make money in order to live and write, but he should not under any circumstances live and write in order to make money. ... The writer by no means looks on his work as a *means*. *It is an end in itself ... The first condition of the freedom of the press is that it is not a business activity.*"

Most cinema, because of the financial conditions of production, is a business activity, and the independence of the filmmaker from capitalism is problematic from the beginning. The British documentary film does not represent a solution. Despite their independence from the film trade and despite their innovations in production and distribution

of films, the documentarists did not succeed in liberating their art but simply made bourgeois domination more directly political by allying themselves with the state. What Marxist critics must reproach the British documentary film with is that it failed to expose the contradictions of the decadent capitalist social system. Wittingly or not, it made of itself a tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Succumbing to the dominant ideology, it sowed illusionism to its working class audience concerning the ultimate reformability of capitalism, and it promulgated the politics of class collaboration.

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Young Frankenstein Some things just aren't funny

by Judith W. Hess

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If Mel Brooks ever stops making movies (a consummation devoutly to be wished) he will no doubt have to let loose his adolescent frenzies on lavatory walls. The anarchic humor of *TWELVE CHAIRS* and *THE PRODUCERS* has degenerated into a hodgepodge of graffiti jokes and inane references to other films.

BLAZING SADDLES is an offensive film. "Good fun" does not redeem nasty little gibes at blacks, women, homosexuals, and home sapiens in general. *YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN* is a silly, pointless film complete with underlying viciousness. Not only does Brooks ignore both the artistry and the social resonances of the 30s Frankenstein films he borrows material from, but he supplies absolutely nothing of significance of his own. The film, which includes stylistic and episodic references to *FRANKENSTEIN*, *BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN*, and *SON OF FRANKENSTEIN*, is a mass of sexual and anal innuendo. "Doodoo," "poopoo undies," and references to penis size evoke giggles only because Brooks has managed to corral first-rate comedians who are too professional to parody their own lines. That the women (Madeline Kahn and Teri Garr) are stupid twits could be considered homage to the drooping, beleaguered heroines of the 30s horror films, but since all the women in all his movies are stupid twits, it becomes difficult to see that particular slur as a reference.

Eric Bentley once pointed out, "Frivolous spoofing is one thing, and serious parody is another." Perhaps a comparison of Peter Bogdanovich's *TARGETS*, a sadly unappreciated film, and *YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN* will illustrate Bentley's point. Both filmmakers have made films which refer to earlier film genres (Bogdanovich's *WHAT'S UP DOC?* and *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW*, for example, and Brooks' *BLAZING SADDLES* and *THE PRODUCERS*). Bogdanovich dissects in a serious and intelligent way the earlier films' cinematic conventions and the relation between the early films and the society out of which they came. Brooks' references to the earlier films are strictly superficial. In

YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN he borrows lab equipment (the laboratory set is the original set), a few episodes (the meeting between the monster and the little girl, Frankenstein's brief sojourn with the blind hermit), a few physical idiosyncraciea (Elsa Lanchester's bride and the Inspector in SON OF FRANKENSTEIN), wipes (which go up, down, sideways, and meet in the middle), and anachronistic iris in and outs (one heart shaped).

Either Brooks is incapable of understanding the original films' relation to their social context, or he ignores it. Certainly he pays no attention to the early films' occasional cinematic elegance. In TARGETS, Boris Karloff states that the monsters he played no longer have direct relevance to the present. He sees the psychotic killer as emblematic of contemporary social and moral chaos, just as Dracula and the mummy symbolized the upheavals of the early thirties. The killer (an attractive, blond young man), hiding behind a drive-in movie screen, picks off one by one the people who have come to see a Karloff rerun. The audience is slow to realize that they are being shot at. People silently sleep across their dashboards, ignored by those around them. The killer is himself isolated—he is at once the product of his era and symbolic of its fragmentation. When Karloff cows the killer with a silver-headed cane, Bogdanovich's conscious reenactment of the traditional horror film's symbolic nature becomes evident. Mel Brooks appears to have no such insight. His Frankenstein's most significant attribute is his large penis. ("If he's seven feet tall, then *it* must be ... hmm.")

However, perhaps YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN's and BLAZING SADDLES' sheer lack of sense and their concentration on the absurd and the base can be seen as an index of the present. Recent films (for example, CHINATOWN, CALIFORNIA SPLIT, THE LONG GOODBYE, THE LAST DETAIL, THE CONVERSATION) contain a pervasive nihilism. Any endeavor is depicted as senseless and self-defeating. The protagonists come to recognize the essentially random nature of things. Continuing to cope seems infinitely complex and ultimately absurd. Mel Brooks' screwy assortment of silly bits delivers such the same message. He creates a world in which nothing has moral or social significance, a world in which racism, sexism, and cruelty evoke titters rather than indignation.

To take up arms against a silly, rather dull farce may seem excessive. Yet, going after a mosquito with an elephant gun makes some sense if the mosquito is malarial. Although it is a slapstick comedy, YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN has little to do with Laurel and Hardy movies or the Keystone Kops one-reelers. Whereas the early slapstick comedians conveyed that human beings have it in them to act absurdly and can be terribly funny, Mel Brooks portrays people as absurd and degraded. The early comedians used their physical ability and a sort of naive trickery to survive the geometrically complex situations they themselves created. Brooks' protagonists rely on an amoral cleverness. There is something repellent about BLAZING SADDLES and YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN. Perhaps some things just aren't funny.

A Very Curious Girl Politics of a feminist fantasy

by Linda Greene

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Picasso is supposed to have said of Nelly Kaplan's *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL*, "This is insolence raised to the status of a fine art." An expert himself at raising insolence to the status of a fine art (consider the monster he created for Chicago's Civic Center), Picasso described the spirit of Kaplan and her work very well with this epigram. The essence of Nelly Kaplan is an attractive prickliness like the friction of fine sandpaper on the skin—the same pleasurably abrasive, cocky honesty which Sylvia Plath captured in *The Bell Jar* when Esther Greenwood recalls looking at Buddy for the first time with his underpants off: "The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and gizzards."

Kaplan's first dramatic feature film, *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* is the comic story of how one woman carries out an unique revenge scheme against her oppressors. The British title of the film, *DIRTY MARY*, does a better job than the U.S. one of suggesting the flavor of the film, in which Marie, the bastard outcast and scapegoat of a small provincial town, avenges herself against the townspeople who have exploited her. She does so by becoming a prostitute, exploiting then on their own terms—sex and economics—and thus reversing the power relationship between herself and them. The film is racy, sardonic and gleeful. It reminds me of a bawdy tale of Boccaccio's or Chaucer's except that it has a grimness which those medieval tales lack (the townspeople pose a real threat to Marie until she gains the upper hand).

The structure of the film is simple: the perfect fulfillment of revenge, once the need for it is established, is its dramatic machinery. Picasso has also been quoted as saying that he found in *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* "the same atmosphere as in the best films of Luis Buñuel." In structure and tone the film is similar not only to a medieval comic tale and a Buñuel film but also to an anecdote or joke. It has the neatness of an anecdote or joke plus the dramatic equivalent of a punch line. Marie's triumphant coup is to play tapes in church of her customers' most confidential remarks and thus embarrassing them publicly. (As you

might guess, the film was completely scripted.)

Brenda Roman noted in *Women and Film* that *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* resembles a play:

“For an original screenplay ... *DIRTY MARY* has many qualities of a stage farce and it could probably be adapted to the stage with little difficulty. It is tightly plotted, and Kaplan provides a clever exposition which uses the extraordinary event of the mother’s death to provide necessary background information—without once slackening the pace and without recourse to flashbacks, voice-over narration, or tedious monologue. Most of the action occurs in one location ... And the breakneck speed of the pacing, which doesn’t allow the viewer second thoughts about the credibility of what he or she is seeing, depends not on quick cutting from shot to shot but on characters dashing into and out of the fairly static medium-long shots much as they would enter and leave a stage.”

Indeed, the camera really doesn’t seem integral: the rhetoric of *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* is that of fiction rather than film. That is, the narration—the way the story is told—hardly involves the special attributes of the camera at all. The presentation of the revenge scheme is a prime example. Through her method of narration—specifically, her particular ways of conveying information to and withholding it from the audience—Kaplan makes the “coup” a gratifying surprise. Early in the film we get hints that Marie is going to retaliate in a special way, besides in the obvious one of exploiting the villagers economically and sexually through prostitution. The several close ups of Marie’s determined face convince us that she’s made a secret resolution, that a plot is in the works. But the details of the plot remain a mystery until Marie springs the plot itself on the townspeople (and the audience) in the church. In this way Kaplan keeps the audience out of Marie’s mind almost entirely. She gives us no inkling of Marie’s mental processes, feelings, judgments, designs, etc.—except for that hint of resolution without the substance of the resolution. Furthermore, because Kaplan focuses us on Marie’s fumbling blindly with the tape recorder as though she hadn’t the faintest idea of how to use it mechanically, let alone politically, we remain unprepared for the upshot, in which the recorder is Marie’s very instrument of revenge.

Thus Kaplan gives Marie an air of infallibility and the film an air of the surreal besides increasing our pleasure in the fulfillment of Marie’s revenge. Speaking of the film’s surrealism, to get at what is surrealistic and more especially what is fantastic about it (terms which I think Claire Johnston was the first to apply to *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* in *Notes on Women’s Cinema*) is to begin to understand the film’s values, limitations, and so its politics. *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL*’s wildly unconventional story and anecdotal quality are two manifestations of the surrealist influence. The unlikeliness of the events is another:

“In real life the townsmen would have imposed their ‘price control’ in earnest. Mary would be reduced to servitude again, her rebellion crushed. And the villagers’ humiliation would be at the price of her own. She would be unlikely to have such an ideal means of escape, since the lover (André, the projectionist) ... is an illusion, very much like the mounted messenger from the Queen in *The Three Penny Opera* who delivers a pardon at the last minute: In real life ‘they come far too seldom.’” (Karyn Kay’s quote of Brenda Roman; the French title of the film is *LA FIANCEE DU PIRATE—THE PIRATE’S FIANCEE*, a reference to Pirate Jenny’s song in *The Three Penny Opera*.)

As I mentioned, the presentation of Marie contributes to the sense of the surreal. By virtue of editing and narrative techniques, Marie is presented as invulnerable and mysterious, as witchlike in her ability to carry out amazing feats single handedly. But most important, *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* is a feminist fantasy. The pleasure and psychological power of the film are those of wish fulfillment. To see the film is to symbolically enact a collective fantasy and experience the satisfaction of having a wild, evil, deeply satisfying dream come true. It’s like wishing, when a strange man makes a passing sexist remark to you, that you could tear him apart for it. *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL*’s attractiveness to feminists is that it arouses us and relieves us emotionally through its mingled violence and humor, by appealing to our fantasy life. As Claire Johnston noted,

“In her films Nelly Kaplan ... stresses the importance of fantasy as a liberating force.”

Any woman who feels the least bit of resentment against men (and who doesn’t?) can’t help feeling the impact of *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL*.

To elaborate on how the film plays out a feminist *fantasy*, Marie, for one thing, doesn’t appear as a role model or someone like ourselves because she doesn’t appear in a “realistic” film. We can’t make an analogy between Marie’s situation and our own in a practical way. Rather, the film exorcises feelings of hostility which our experiences as women have created in us. Therefore, Marie is an agent in carrying out our fantasy of revenge against the oppressor, and the film purges us of our anger and restores our dignity and self-respect. Our own experiences don’t appear in *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* except in an exaggerated form. There is a great disparity between the probabilities of the film and those of our own lives (for instance, the men in the film are complete slaves to lust).

The pleasure of seeing some of the scenes is exquisite. *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* made film history (as far as I know) as the first film to contain a scene in which a woman successfully vanquishes a male assailant. This is no mean achievement for the director. I myself am fed up with movies in which, women get raped or smashed in the face with Coke bottles or hacksawed to death. I loathe the violence done constantly to women characters in man-made films. So, for women who are sick of the cupcakes, snakes, and doormats which usually pass for women characters in feature films, there’s an exquisite satisfaction in witnessing the scene of Marie’s victory over her assailant. For Marie,

when he springs at her throat, responds as any sensible woman would: she gives him a good, hard kick in the balls. Paralyzed by the pain, her would-be attacker becomes her victim. Marie nudges his writhing body out the door with her foot and says coolly, "Next time. pick on someone your own size." During the fall 1973 screening of *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* by the Film Center of the Art Institute of Chicago, this scene galvanized the women in the audience. Our spontaneous, collective outbreak of delighted laughter, cheers and applause scared and scandalized the men in the audience but for us was a rare, joyous experience.

There's no doubt that in many ways *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* is, as a feminist fantasy, a very effective and valuable film. It presents actions we're starved to see on film and does so in a way that makes us laugh delightedly and triumphantly and feel proud instead of humiliated and angry. Because it speaks to us so powerfully, *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* became, in only four years, a Movement classic. Because we love Kaplan's film and because we want so badly to find an eloquent artistic expression of our feminism, we can't find *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* easy to criticize. But there's no denying that to some extent it disappoints us because it is a feminist fantasy.

If *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* had a subtitle, it would have to be *SEXUAL POLITICS*. That Marie exploits her exploiters—fights sexual politics with sexual politics—is both the film's strength and its weakness. The sexual politics of Kaplan's film are tremendously effective because they satisfy the nearly boundless, well-justified vindictiveness which many women feel toward men. But because of its sexual politics, the film doesn't satisfy a more important need—the need we have for naturalistic, revolutionary feminist films which would present women (or women and men) working together toward a common goal in a non-competitive and non-exploitative manner.

As Kaplan remarked to the audience at the Chicago Women's Film Festival last fall, Marie starts out on all fours like an animal and becomes a person by the end of the film. However, there is an important qualification: Marie becomes a "person" by exploiting and dehumanizing other people, and she becomes a subject only by treating others like objects—as they do her. Only her friendship with the projectionist André suggests the possibility of a subject-to-subject relationship, one based on mutual respect and cooperation.

Essentially, *A VERY CURIOUS GIRL* is individualistic. It doesn't imagine any new possibilities in people's behavior toward one another or teach us anything new about ourselves but remains bound to the power relationships which it exposes as corrupt and shows to be defeatable on their own terms. It pokes fun at bourgeois behavior, but because of its satiric element it can't free itself from the sick human relationships it satirizes. The fact that it satirizes enslaves it to the object of the satire. The satire wouldn't be intelligible or enjoyable if the satirized object weren't recognizable to the audience by appearing in the

film. By turning bourgeois values and attitudes inside out, Kaplan's film tries to subvert sexual politics, but it ends up confirming them by organizing itself around that. Marie, for example, is presented as magical and mysterious, and thus the character is consistent with sexist myths of "Woman" and her "nature." Bourgeois literature celebrates individual sensibilities, and A VERY CURIOUS GIRL is a bourgeois film insofar as it is an individualistic fantasy and can't help attaching itself to a bourgeois perspective on society.

Because it is this kind of feminist fantasy, A VERY CURIOUS GIRL couldn't contain a revolutionary sequence of events. Even when Maria becomes a "person," she can't change the consciousness of the townspeople. She can't recognize the similarity of her situation as a prostitute to that of the women in the town as wives, and the film itself doesn't draw that conclusion. Class-consciousness and the development of a revolutionary movement couldn't become events in a film such as this one, for the only reality of social life which the film could present is warfare. For other human possibilities we have to look to different kinds of films.

That Marie's revenge is the exploitation of her exploiters and fantasizes the cancelling out of exploitation with a lethal dose of its own medicine makes A VERY CURIOUS GIRL the ultimate feminist fantasy before the revolutionary feminist film—before in the sense of a dialectic, not time. Made in 1931, MAEDCHEN IN UNIFORM is such a film: seeing it is an act of survival instead of escape. To use a remark made in 1911 by an anonymous woman factory worker about a story she'd read, Sagan's film is the kind that gives us "courage in our hearts for the struggle."

It would be convenient if I could give A VERY CURIOUS GIRL a rating according to the daily newspaper star system, but assessing its politics isn't as simple as that. I'm still ambivalent about the film and am not the first woman who's tried to articulate her uneasiness about it. I can't dismiss a film which has as strong a hold on me as A VERY CURIOUS GIRL does. And I feel that this serious a film demands even more serious critical attention by feminists than it's received already. Most of all, I'm confident that Nelly Kaplan, if given the funds and artistic control she's always found difficult to obtain as a woman filmmaker, will do even better. After all, Kaplan herself wrote that "there is genius in the veins of women," and she is no exception.

Metz' new directions

by John M. Finn

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French Film theoretician Christian Metz has undertaken a second major phase of research. In his earlier works, *Essais sur le signification au Cinéma* (Tomes I and II) and *Langage et cinéma*, Metz attempted to apply semiology to the structural analysis of film. Semiology is appropriate for film because it is the science of signs and as Roland Barthes says,

“aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all theme, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment. “(1)

In his most recent work as well as his past work, Metz has chosen to study the classical narrative film. He does not deal with the continuity of particular films, condoning or condemning their themes, plot developments, character portrayals, and sociopolitical ramifications. Instead he goes much deeper, exposing and questioning the very mechanisms by which all fiction films operate. Metz attempts to point out the codes upon which this mechanism is totally dependent.

Codes are elements which form a system of signification (e.g., dress codes, behavior codes, speech codes, etc.). In Metz's latest work these codes are both physiological and psycho-sociological, forming a vary complex network or system which Metz has delineated in all three of his major works. In his first major work, *Essais sur le signification au cinéma*. Metz outlined a syntactic structure, articulated on the level of the sequence, to which narrative films of the sound era, from 1930 to approximately 1955, generally adhered. In *Langage at cinéma*, Metz examined the interrelations between specifically cinematic codes (lighting, angle, editing, close ups, etc.) and those codes from daily life that narrative cinema incorporates. Such codes as those of the automobile, middle-class household, cocktail party, smoking, fashion, travel, and establishment politics are manipulated and placed within the narrative films.

Essais and *Langage et cinéma* seem relatively neutral or apolitical, although Metz in person would assert that he was interested in that period of narrative cinema as a naive or unselfconscious reflection of bourgeois ideology. In his current research, he is again studying this type of cinema, but with a specifically political intent incorporated into his research. He combines two approaches. He uses vision theory to explore the physiological relation between spectator and film, and he uses dream theory to explore that relation in psychological terms. In U.S. terms, Metz is carrying out a sort of psychoanalytical market research to determine why people like films with “plots,” and how this attraction is the major selling point and foundation of commercial cinema.

Metz feels that fiction film has taken over the role in Western culture performed previously by the novel. His major concern now is to provide an explanation of the mechanisms by which narrative or fiction films affect audiences and how these mechanisms establish fiction film as an historical institution operating within Western capitalist culture. The political critique of Metz’s earlier research was that it was idealistic, placing the specifically cinematic codes outside the realm of history and ideology. Currently his work demonstrates how the physiological and psychological mechanisms that films draw on serve to maintain film as a commodity which people want to consume.

Because the film spectator pays his/her money voluntarily, the commercial narrative or fiction film must appeal to certain desires which seem to merit the payment. Metz feels Hollywood fiction film manipulates the spectator’s very psyche and even further, sells the establishment to our subconscious. Hollywood films which deal with contemporary time are a major source of cultural conditioning. Fast cars, cigarette smoking, martinis-after-a-hard-day-at-the-office, green lawned suburban homes, chic loft apartments, and most important the entire system of bourgeois Judeo-Christian ethics, morality and mythology are all beamed to our psyche, and the results speak for themselves. Likewise, the recent barrage of Hollywood nostalgia films has created blossoming fads in hairstyles, clothing, and home furnishings. We are indeed lucky *GATSBY* was a bomb, even though there were minor effects on the fashion industry. Metz wishes to analyze how this relationship is perpetrated, and his argument is based principally on the relationship between spectator and projected film at the time of viewing. In the rest of this essay I will outline the way in which Metz discusses the relation between certain physiological codes, based mostly on vision theory, and the psychosociological codes at work when one watches a fiction film. These latter Metz draws from Freud’s dream theory and some of his own earlier semiological work on signs and representation in *Essais* and *Langage et Cinéma*.

Critique du cinéma diégèse was the title Metz chose for a series of lectures he gave in the spring of 1974.⁽²⁾ *Diégèse* comes from the Greek word “diegesis” which refers to the western tradition of imitating reality, especially in narrative form. “Fiction” is the synonym for diegesis Metz

most often employed in his discussions. “*Cinéma diégèse*” refers to the whole process of production, distribution, and consumption of fiction films. He uses the term “institution of fiction film” interchangeably with “*cinéma diégèse*.” Metz wants to discuss more than the films themselves. All fiction films are included in Metz’s analysis, from the most sophisticated multimillion dollar Hollywood production to a low budget “B” flick, regardless of subject matter, ideology, quality of cinematography or artistic value. However, Metz’s critique does not deal with particular films and qualitative plot analysis whatsoever.

Metz uses vision theory to discuss the physiological relationship between spectator and film. In normal human or retinal vision, two separate retinal images are transformed into one in the brain. We cannot see or feel this process, we can only experience its end product. Our eyes register two separate images, but we only “see” one. This can easily be demonstrated by holding an object in front of one’s face and looking at this object first with both eyes and then with each eye separately. The object appears to move as vision is transferred from one eye to the other. When we look at the object with both eyes we are seeing the end product of the two separate images.

This vision process is also psychological, for identifying objects in a given image is a culturally learned process. We learn in our infancy how to identify and name the objects we see by means of language which provides an ordered system of classification. We do not attend to objects we cannot identify. In the vision process, therefore, we receive two slightly different images, registered as one, and “translated” in the brain.

Normal retinal vision transforms three-dimensional objects into two-dimensional images. We learn “relief” or three-dimensionality as infants by touching objects to determine that they have both form and shape. We determine the relative distance of objects by their known or learned size and form, which we compare to their relative size in our field of vision. For example, if a person is looking across valley to a house on top of a hill which has a tree next to it, he can estimate the distance of the house for he knows the house’s dimensions because it is an easily identified object. Therefore, we can also determine the relative size of the tree standing next to the house by comparing its size in the field of vision. Three-dimensionality exists during the normal vision process but two-dimensionality is substituted unnoticed during the vision process of film.

Film is merely a flat image projected on a screen. In a film, however, a miniature house and tree, perhaps to be blown up, could be substituted on the set and the flattening effect would prohibit the viewer from perceiving their true sizes. Again, this process is both physiological and psychological. The film image is processed in the brain without having to be transformed into a two-dimensional image since it already is one. We are not capable of perceiving this process, only the end product.

Film, the reproduction and then projection of images at 24 frames per second, functions as an effigy of the real world. Our eyes perform the

same vision process, and we identify objects on the screen as we do in the real world. However, when we see things in the real world, our two retinas register separate images. Film subverts normal or binocular vision. When the spectator sees the images in a film, both retinas register a two-dimensional image, but the spectator is unaware that monocular vision is being substituted for binocular vision.

The illusion of three dimensionality is good enough for our psyche to accept as being real. Not only do the objects in the image function as an effigy of the real world but simulate the actual mechanism of perspective. The use of rear projection is totally dependent on this subversion and serves as a good example of the phenomena. In countless films, objective shots of the characters riding in an automobile are used. The unwary spectator thinks that the background moving behind the car is really part of the shot. He or she believes the car was in fact being driven down the road and filmed that way. However due to the subversion of three-dimensional vision, the filmmaker has merely shot the sequence in a studio with the car immobile while projecting an already filmed, outdoor background behind the car. A flat image (the projected background) is refilmed along with the three-dimensional car and characters, and the illusion goes unnoticed. Some directors are more proficient at this than others and add flickers of light on the subjects and often mount the studio car on a machine which simulates normal road bumps and sways. A truly professional job may go unnoticed even to a trained spectator. (3)

Earlier films which pioneered this technique such as KING KONG lacked the know-how to carry off this process perfectly. This film used rear projection extensively and paved the way for the horror and fantasy boom to come. Usually when the camera angle of the subject and the angle of the refilmed background do not correspond exactly, an observant spectator can see that the process has been used. In Minelli's GIGI during the carriage sequences, it is not very difficult to see that rear projection has been used. The shooting angle of the carriage and the angle of the refilmed background of buildings do not match.

Metz moves from a discussion of the vision process to show how we perceive movement in film. Since film is a flat image, all movement of objects within this image must be frontal and not axial. Objects do not move closer or farther away, they only become larger or smaller. When someone in a film appears to be walking towards the camera, on the screen they are merely enlarging. Movement in film gives the illusion of being identical to movement in the real world, again because film is able to subvert the vision process by providing an image similar enough to that received by three-dimensional perception, and as a result is accepted as real. We do not have real depth perception in cinema, but we accept the two-dimensional enlarging or shrinking as an image of movement in depth. We do not read film movement as just a lateral movement across a two-dimensional field.

While the spectator sits motionless, the camera movement seems to

change the size and distance of objects. The combination of spectator motionlessness, camera movement, and editing destroys the spectator's normal points of reference, as for example when the image track switches from a long shot of an outdoor landscape to an extreme close up of someone's face. The image on the screen replaces the normal field of vision, and the spectator loses the normal points of reference that would be necessary in a three-dimensional vision situation to determine the actual size and distance of objects. We are all familiar with the use of toy battleships and toy cities in fictional cities in fictional films. Cinema frequently utilizes this subversion of the normal vision process as the basis for many optical illusions and visual tricks. The film industry depends on its visual tricks generally going unnoticed by the viewing public.

Hitchcock uses this subversion of the vision process in many of his films. In *STRANGERS ON A TRAIN* a woman is strangled, and the spectator does not actually see the act committed. Instead we see a reflection of the man choking her in what are supposed to be her glasses fallen in the grass. Hitchcock had a pair of giant glasses made especially to film this "reflection." Because film destroys reference points found in a normal field of vision, the spectator has no way of knowing the true size of the glasses and therefore assumes they are of normal proportions. Although any filmmaker could exploit these codes of subversion, experimental filmmakers more frequently try to foreground cinematic process and make spectators aware of the cinematic and perceptual elements involved. However, fiction films expand upon and even abuse the basic codes of subversion, the traditional aim of "diegesis" being to "imitate reality." Metz shows that film's way of manipulating visual perception gives a physiological-perceptual basis to the "realism" of fiction film—even to its spectacular and fantasy-creating elements. It makes these elements realistic and acceptable to the viewing public as a reasonable part of a fictional world.

Approaching fiction film from a psychoanalytical point of view, Metz uses Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* to describe important similarities between the state of one's psyche during a fiction film and a person's psyche during a dream. Because of factors common to both processes, fiction films have a powerful psychological potential as a means of propaganda. Metz feels that Hollywood is a "regime" of fiction and wields its power as an important source of cultural brainwashing in this country.

Film spectators physically experience something similar to a dream state. They are seated motionless in a dark room, whereas while dreaming people lie in bed in a dark room. During a film people don't close their eyes, but their normal 3-D field of vision has been replaced by a 2-D screen. During a dream, the normal field of vision is replaced by images created inside the brain. The film provides an illusion of the reel world in the face of visual and audio stimuli, which the spectator identifies in the same way that the stimuli are identified in a real world situation. A dreamer similarly perceives stimuli created by the brain.

The dream situation is not exactly like the film viewing situation but they have certain important aspects in common.

During a dream an individual does not usually perceive the dream as a dream. It is basically a subconscious function. However, during certain moments the individual becomes conscious of the dream and often is able to recall the experience. Film spectators are basically conscious that they are watching a film. But as one's attention is drawn more and more into the fiction, during certain moments depending on the individual, spectators lose their self-awareness about the act of watching a film: the willing suspension of disbelief. People get drawn into the story as if the characters in the film were actually "living" those moments of action. Such suspension of disbelief is necessary for people to be scared by a horror film or to be caught up in the narrative of a suspense film. These moments when the spectator slips from being consciously aware that it is only a film correspond to a person's subconscious state during a dream. Metz calls this a "transfer of perspective," for the spectator has transferred all of his thought processes to the fiction of the film. During these periods when the spectator is in an almost subconscious state, films gain access to our psyches. Such moments are also fundamental to the processes of brainwashing and propaganda.

Metz gives a psychoanalytical interpretation of the relation between a fiction film and our psyches during these subconscious periods. Every individual has within his or her psyche a system of desires and fears—desires belonging to the ego and fears or guilt belonging to the superego which function as a sort of self-censorship mechanism. This is especially so in terms of socially embedded values or morality: the do's and don'ts children are conditioned to accept. This conditioning, of course, differs with each person, but it plays an important role in letting us know which of our desires are normal and which are perverse. (Freud meant normal and perverse as distinctions between "majority" and "minority," but Western capitalist culture has misinterpreted these for its own purposes to mean "good" and "bad.")

Our psyche evaluates all of the objects and situations we encounter in the real world and, therefore, in film. We process our perceptions through our system of desires and fears (censorship) and give them connotation and opinion. This is how the fiction film "communicates" with our psyche. It presents illusions of real world situations which plug themselves into our psyche and play upon our desires and fears. Desires, both normal and perverse, are appealed to and restraints or controls of these desires are applied within the narrative of the films. Particularly apropos are Hollywood genre films. As Judith Hess points out in her article in JUMP CUT no. 1, "Genre Films and the Status Quo":

"Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action, pity and fear rather than revolt; they serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo and they throw a sop to oppressed groups who, because they are unorganized and afraid to act, eagerly accept the genre

film's absurd solutions to economic and social conflicts. When we return to the complexities of the society in which we live, the same conflicts assert themselves so we return to the genre films for easy comfort and solace—hence their popularity.”

More important, while appealing to our desires, these fiction films condition our superegos or self-censorship mechanisms to pattern after those shown in the films. The spectator learns to restrain his or her desires as they are restrained within the narrative of the film. One can easily see how *THE EXORCIST* exemplifies this phenomenon. A film seen by millions across the country tells us that, yes, the devil does exist, he can possess your children, sexual deviation is widely practiced in hell, and only the church can undo the curse. The suspense and violence employed in this film serve to pull the spectator more into the fiction and hammer home the propaganda.

Metz described how film is an exterior force which nourishes our fantasies. Fiction films act like a drug, not only by providing the stimulus for the fantasy but also the fantasy. 2001 with its outer space, futuristic and mechanical melodrama, and mysticism certainly encourages the spectator to fantasize. We even learn that representatives of the two superpowers will often meet casually in a space station lounge. But this was before the oil crisis, and don't forget that mysterious steel beam floating around in the darkened studio with all those toy planets and spaceships.

Even in terms of structure, we can easily see how films affect our dreams. Cinematographic processes such as long shots, pans and close ups create a sort of montage during dreams. Doubters need only contemplate their own dream recollections to see how this works.

The possibilities for an economic interpretation of the relationship between fiction film and our psyches are great. In a super-consumption economy such as ours, demand is created by the same sector which controls production and supply. The producers entice the consumer via advertising. Fiction film, when viewed on a large scale including, of course, fiction on television, plays an extremely important role in creating demand, for it is one of the dominant forms of entertainment. The fiction films present a grand illusion of the realm of possibilities of life styles to the viewing public. Spectators see houses, new cars, new clothes, liquor, cigarettes, jet travel, and all kinds of elaborate gadgetry as part of the environment within these narrative films. Hollywood sells the American Dream by a direct assault on our subconscious. Metz has shown us film's potential for brainwashing and film's effect on our psyche in an unrhetorical and analytic way. When we see how spectators relate to fiction films, we can easily understand why demand is created for the consumer goods seen. The research Metz has carried out on what he calls the “institution of fiction film” only clarifies and substantiates what many anti-establishment critics have touched upon in their criticisms of Hollywood cinema.

As Critique du cinema diégése appears, the question will undoubtedly be raised, "If people like films with plots, like Hollywood produces, why shouldn't they go to see them, for these films are just a form of entertainment?" Metz says that we are in a sense working in an oppressive system and then paying to be conditioned to like it.

Public entertainment is our reward, which we pay for with the money we earned working for the system. But fiction film functions as a seams of social control as it manipulates our psyches and conditions us into certain patterns of thinking and behaving. The solution, Metz believes, is one of education, of convincing people that they are being manipulated in a very dangerous way. In the past, Metz's work has been used by lovers of fictional film to analyze those films, for Metz seemed to be providing a scientific and apolitical analysis of the mechanisms of narrative film. Now he wants to provide scientific and highly motivated analysis to help people see through Hollywood cinema, to challenge the ways in which that cinema prevents us from being critical of the system in which we live. He uses psychoanalytical tools with same of the same intent as the psychoanalyst—to reveal psychosocial mechanisms impinging on the individual's life in a way which challenges these mechanisms, brings them under control, and thus opens up pathways for more independent and creative human thought. Metz is fully aware that it would mean attacking financially profitable institutional structures and preferred forms of entertainment to effect such changes.

More than likely, the fiction film is here to stay. People are too conditioned to plots to give them up. Still, Metz's work will prove extremely valuable in helping people to understand the power of fiction in film and to act accordingly. For Third World cultures, it could help avoid the obvious pitfalls of fiction addiction we in the United States are experiencing.

Notes:

[1.](#) *Elements of Semiology*, tr. Annette Levers and Cohn Smith (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

[2.](#) Christiam Metz presented his latest research in a seminar held for students in the University of California's Paris Film Program, a program of one year's graduate and undergraduate study of international cinema, film history and theory and semiology, co-sponsored by the Council on International Educational Exchange. For this article I had no printed matter or recordings, only my handtaken notes from the seminar. Therefore, the reader must be cautioned of the possibility of minor errors in interpretation on my part. However, every effort has been made to state Metz's ideas accurately. Metz has not yet published this material but will in the next year or so.

[3.](#) Not all filmmakers use this trick method. In some cases the car is pulled by a truck with a camera mounted and some directors let the characters actually drive the car, filming from another unattached

vehicle. In these two cases the background is really part of the shot.

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Film and the American experience

by Marie Claire Kolbensschlag

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The recent shift in film criticism from auteur theory to genre analysis signals an important change in critical methodology. The critic has been handed a pickaxe and shovel to replace tweezers and pins. He/ she confronts a massive, undifferentiated mound of cultural experience, of which film is an intrinsic element. He/ she must excavate and sift the structures of the U.S. consciousness and finally extract, define and interpret film artifacts as an expression of that consciousness.

Film cannot be understood apart from its social and generic context, particularly in a culture where film has consistently fulfilled an economic function, where it has been a tribal expression and, indeed, something of a ritual. To this collective significance can be added the fact of its persistence. U.S. film is almost three-quarters of a century old now. It has survived long enough to acquire historical as well as formal definition and distinction. If it has been clichéd and redundant, this incremental quality is perhaps the best evidence of its roots in the native imagination.

In the analysis of a cultural artifact, the study of cultural mythology is a necessary premise. The film, for instance, is more than a mirror-image of an age. It not only contains the myths of a generation or a people, it is produced by them and shapes reality in turn. Thus, the relation between the artifact and the informing mythology is causal as well as typical.

In his *Sociologie de la littérature* (Paris, 1960) Robert Escarpit has suggested that the work of art exists in a three-dimensional context. It participates simultaneously in a relation to its author, to its audience, and to itself as art. Escarpit's 'trois modalités' are a representation of a cluster of temporal structures which cohere as an entity because they interrelate. This coherence is in itself a cultural system, a microcosm of the real and imaginative cosmos in which we exist. Each of these dimensions can be explored separately by the critic. But ultimately it is their coherence as a cultural system which claims his/her attention,

Thus the film is more than an artifact. It is a microcosm suspended in

the enveloping cosmos of the U.S. consciousness, the imaginative articulation of U.S. experience and ambience. It is above all an event. When the film critic sets out to explore this phenomenon, he/she is, in fact, engaged in a kind of visual cosmology or anthropology. The critic would do well not to neglect the trail markings left by the Americanists—scientists and scholars—who have preceded him or her. In the ensuing paragraphs I will describe some of these markings and suggest points of relevance.

ARTS IN AMERICA

John Kouweshoven's study, *The Arts in Modern American Civilization* (first published in 1941 under the title *Made in America*, should be a kind of primer for the critic of U.S. film. It is one of the best and earliest contemporary works which delineates in a total cultural context the native, "vernacular" style in U.S. art. Kouwenhoven attributes certain indigenous qualities to the "vernacular" arts, as distinguished from the "cultivated" or learned tradition.

"In their least diluted form these patterns comprise the folk arts of the first people in history who, disinherited of a great cultural tradition, found themselves living under democratic institutions in an expanding machine economy."(13)

The vernacular arts, then, are preeminently simple, democratic, technological and pragmatic, marked by imaginative ingenuity but ornamental constraint. The style is evident in a variety of U.S. artifacts—in metalwork and furniture, in architecture, painting and sculpture, in literature, theater and dance, in music and film, and even in machinery. Americans have always been a people in love with things, especially things that move. (The archetypal sequences that were the genesis of the modern film were those of things in motion: Lumière's TRAIN ARRIVING AT THE STATION, Marey's sequences of animals and humans in motion.)

The machine incarnates the archetypal myths of motion and of making. It has mesmerized U.S. consciousness from our beginnings. Kouwenhoven describes better than anyone else this symbiotic relationship between the U.S. psyche and the machines that have commanded our landscape as well as our imagination. These include the locomotive and the rifle, the wagon and the axe, the whaling ship and the riser boat, the plow and the tractor, the truck and the automobile, the flying machine and the sewing machine. The mythic resonance that many of these native fabrications have in the U.S. arts—particularly in film—should not go unassessed. Just as Zen consciousness and the haiku experience have influenced the art of Japanese film, our romance with the machine has saturated U.S. films. Technology and psychology merge in the filmmaker's skill as well as in his/ her vision. If nothing else, our films are the attics of a collective spirit that has created a society chiefly through its relation with tools, stuffed with broken and obsolete motors—the true props and costumes of our national character. Part of the fascination of the current nostalgia trend in film is our

universal fascination with the films of a bygone era—with the objects and accoutrements, the vessels and the vehicles of the past.

The distinction between the “vernacular” and “cultivated” styles is not without implications for the student of film. Moreover, the distinction is at the heart of contemporary discussions on popular culture. “Literature and Covert Culture,” the germinal essay by Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx, and Arnold Rose of 1957, Dwight McDonald’s “Theory of Mass Culture” of 1953, and perhaps half a dozen earlier journal discussions laid the groundwork for the current interest in the popular arts. The introduction of this distinction between an elite, learned cultural context and a popular one has given the contemporary critic a new tool—one that permits excursions into cultural anthropology as well as aesthetics. Film critics have been among the last to exploit this tool, particularly as it relates to the total semiotic context of individual film events.

FILM AS POPULAR ART

As a popular art, U.S. film is unique in many respects. In the development of the country’s architecture, the basic forms were inherited for the most part from the older “cultivated” civilization and later modified by such “vernacular” influences as the balloon-frame construction. Kouwenhoven notes, by comparison, that in the case of film’s development, the process was reversed. The movies emerged first as a popular art, a vernacular form that was devoid of the private, cultivated aesthetic impulse to satisfy an exclusive audience. The Nickelodeon and Biograph era was marked by the transfer of native U.S. fictional and theatrical style to the cinema. Melodramatic, climactic, spectacular, scenic, pantomimic folk realism characterized the early films of the twentieth century as it characterized the late nineteenth century dime novel and stage. The content as well as the style was cut to the common person’s taste: *THE LIFE OF AN AMERICAN FIREMAN*; *THE EVICTION*; *BERTHA*, *THE SEWING MACHINE GIRL*, *NELLIE*, *THE BEAUTIFUL CLOAK MODELS*, *RAFFLES*, *THE AMATEUR CRACKSMAN*. The early titles display an antagonism for the affluent as well as a democratic preoccupation with some social problems: *THE CROOKED BANKER*, *THE MISER’S FATE*, *THE DRAFTERS*, *SIGHT-SEEING THROUGH WHISKEY*, *AUTOMOBILE THIEVES*, *GAJETIES OF DIVORCE*, *WHEN WOMEN VOTE*. Subjects received comic or tragic treatment depending on the current popular disposition. Kouwenhoven’s contention that “the men and women who made the early films were in the business of providing mass entertainment in a medium which had been created by machines and science” (213) is strengthened by the fact that the early film studios were called factories.

As the nickelodeons faded into the movie palaces, the lure of gentility began to erode the popular tradition. Movie makers became self-conscious and sensitive to critics, who began to analyze films as new art forms. Actors and directors who had been trained in the sophisticated arts began to make movies. Imported influences and the attraction of

bourgeois respectability were evident in many of the new directors: von Sternberg's heavy pictorialism, Lang's stylization, Tourneur's affinity with interiors. Murnau's subjective atmosphere and angle, de Mille's manners and morality scenarios, Zukor's attempts to add class to cinema. With the coming of the talkies and the continuing clamor for longer features, the motion picture increasingly came to resemble a photographed play. When cinema had first robbed the stage of its content, technique and audience, the theater abdicated from its flamboyant popular style and retreated to a verbal and plot-centered dramaturgy. Arthur McClure, in his *The Movies: An American Idiom*, observes:

“The stage, driven back from that contact with the larger public, had taken refuge in the service of sophisticated metropolitan minorities.” (50-51)

The ironic turnabout later by which movies were driven to imitation of the art they had initially imitated was another contributing factor in the gradual depopularization of film.

Some, like Griffith, continued to project the historical and popular mythology of the masses through sophisticated technique. Others began to ransack the classics and the fantasies of the cultural aristocrats for new subjects. Chaplin went on mocking the genteel virtues of the bourgeois classes. The humor, vulgarity, and classless condition of his film roles remained essentially popular in content.

The twenties were, indeed, a period of confluence of styles in U.S. film. Kouwenhoven's distinction between the “vernacular” and the “cultivated” variations is a useful spectograph, especially when it includes the concept of popular or mass culture. A comparison of a film like John Ford's *IRON HORSE* of 1924 and *THE GREAT GATSBY* of 1974 illuminates certain obvious differences. Ford's picture is based on a well-known pop fiction motif, reiterated in countless dime novels: the familiar Union Pacific trail story. It is basically a formula film, dependent upon improvisation for its success. Jack Clayton's *GATSBY*, on the other hand, is slavishly derived from an artifact of “elite” culture—a slick, carefully crafted novel. Point of view in the original work, as in the movie, is focused and subjective. There is no Nick Carraway in *THE IRON HORSE*. There, point of view is general and cosmic—or omniscient, as the novelist would say. This basic orientation to the subjective is reflected in the camera techniques of *GATSBY*, which tend to inflate Mia Farrow and Robert Redford rather than develop the content of the characters they represent. In *THE IRON HORSE* it is the myth itself that is the subject of the film—the individual against the heroic backdrop of the enterprise. *GATSBY* is decedent in its subject matter as well as in its treatment. In *GATSBY* environment is seen as a projection of ego, as indeed language was in the original novel of Scott Fitzgerald. Both films are “rearview” mirrors of the past; both are saturated with the accoutrements of an era. *GATSBY* is stuffed with things consciously displayed; *THE IRON HORSE* with things

discovered, revealed, half-hidden yet in the context of time. Myth is artificially introduced into *GATSBY*, even more obviously than in the novel, when the narrator explicitly reminds us of the New World success fantasy. In *THE IRON HORSE*, myth is unconsciously present in the structure of the story itself. Thus the popular film has an epic quality, and the elite film is the tragedy of a romantic egotist. But the effect of the latter is not ironic recognition. Rather, it elicits a sort of maudlin sympathy for Gatsby, whose veneer of innocence is a function of the audience's desire to participate in the genteel affluence of the world he represents.

In his essay, "The Movies Are Now High Art," Richard Schickel has commented on the narrowing strata of film audiences in the contemporary United States. Three-fourths of filmgoers are under 40 years of age, and the regulars tend to be college students (or college-bound) and college graduates.

"Movies aren't movies any more. They are the playthings of the New Class, those who are custodians (or, perhaps, prisoners) of the technostucture." (131)

Movies are no longer a vernacular, popular art. Those who consume them most are those trained in the perception of a literate tradition. Thus the highly conventionalized syntax of literacy has been transformed into cinematic language that demands a more specific audience. The phenomenon of the American Film Theatre is perhaps the most recent evidence of this shift in sensibility.

The critics, who are the custodians of the New Literates par excellence, are often mystified when—in spite of their glowing reviews—a film flops at the box office, or when—in spite of their diatribes—a 'B' film is a sell-out. Witness the case of *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* or *MCCABE AND MRS. MILLER*. In regard to the latter, the director has admitted that he set out to demythologize the Western, thus depopularizing what the audience might have expected to be a formula film. The recent TV run of *MIDNIGHT COWBOY* (sans 27 minutes of the original) received dismal ratings—probably because the mass audience expected a familiar formula and could not perceive one. In fact, the reason so many critics have such poor antennae is perhaps the same reason that many people who frequented the movies in the 40s and 50s would prefer to watch TV shows today. The films that please the mass U.S. audience have always been popular—formula art, not elite art or super-art or anti-art.

It is the very persistence of the formula in popular art that heightens the significance of variations introduced into the pattern, revealed in the diachronic nuances of successive works. Compare, for example, the proto-Western *THE VIRGINIAN* (starring Gary Cooper in 1929) and the popular Western of 1952, *HIGH NOON* (also starring Gary Cooper). In the conventional denouement of the Western, as in *THE VIRGINIAN*, the code hero becomes a principle of reconciliation (often via the showdown) between the outlaw forces and the forces of civilization. The maverick hero turns to public service, relinquishes his life of absolute

freedom, marries the schoolmarm, and settles down as the town marshal. HIGH NOON follows the formula for the most part, but at the end there is a significant variation. The tough, gutsy, independent marshal rides off into the sunset with his new bride—after he has thrown away his badge in a gesture of cynicism. It is precisely such variations that highlight affective transformations or changes in audience expectations and emotional associations. And at the same time, these variations reveal the persistence of formulaic values in the midst of social change.

U.S. film history offers a rich mine of these recurring popular formulae. We have had at least three versions of the Bonnie and Clyde story, several variants of the Mafia saga from UNDERWORLD of 1927 to the more recent THE BROTHERHOOD and THE GODFATHER, hundreds of variations on THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY and THE VIRGINIAN, and assorted versions of the Southern lynch mob story. Popular films like ON THE WATERFRONT, COOL HAND LUKE, and THEY SHOOT HORSES, DON'T THEY? all had their prototypes in earlier decades. What appeals to popular taste is bound to be repeated and imitated. It acquires cultural significance in the chronological mutations that the formula undergoes. Film formulae are reservoirs of our collective mythic experience. They are time capsules that tell us not how things were, but how we imagined ourselves to be.

WEST AS SYMBOL AND MYTH

One of the first Americanists to give us a comprehensive view of the U.S. self-image and a genealogy of the reality it has begotten was Henry Nash Smith. His intuitive and brilliant study, *Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth* (1950) explores what he concludes is the dominant symbology and mythology of the U.S. psyche—frontier consciousness. He begins by tracing the historical roots of the Westward pilgrimage's dream in search of a northwest passage and ultimately for a garden in the wilderness. Lest we forget the avalanche of rhetoric that swelled the manifest destiny theme of the Westward movement, his study recalls the names, voices, and words of the great exodus. Whether it is the trapper, pioneer, homesteader, cavalryman, gold hunter, railroader, politician or business tycoon, their idiom is the same. The "mission of the North American people" is always described in the accents and metaphors that were used for Columbus in 1492.

Daniel Boone and Leatherstocking were the popular types who best exemplified the U.S. romance with the wilderness. One of the by-products of the exodus mentality was the emergence of an intuitive ethical code, a primitive, naked power of will and energy that came to be associated with frontier heroes. As the conditions of his testing grew more savage, the popular hero became even more of an anarchist. Thus, what Smith calls the "second generation" of popular types—the fur trapper and the mountain man—were much more uncivilized than Daniel Boone had been. The crescendo of blood and guts in the popular imagination is reflected in the development of the dime novel. The

moral ambiguity of later heroes like Deadwood Dick and Jesse James, the sheer proliferation of homicides and sadism, the evolution of the cowboy from a herdsman into a gunslinger in popular fiction, these all suggest that there is a kind of Gresham's Law operating in the cultural consciousness.

Seth Jones and Deadwood Dick eventually spawn Nick Carter and most of his pulp descendants in the twentieth century. The emergence of the cops-and-robbers variant from the Western narrative near the end of the nineteenth century is further evidence of the subliminal obsession with violence in the popular imagination. And this obsession is transformed into even more pejorative structures with the passing of time.

This gradual acceleration of violence which Virgin Land suggests has an obvious relevance for the film critic who wishes to explore the deep structures of consciousness that lie beneath U.S. film. Richard Slotkin has more recently provided us with a monumental documentation of the same subject in his *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*. Slotkin's work is a more precise and definitive exposition of the violence motif. It goes much farther in the implications it draws. In establishing the link between Puritan piety and the frontier ethic, Slotkin identifies as the transitional element, the popular mythology of the Indian Wars. The Indian Wars and the threat of Indian captivity proved to be, in rhetoric as well as in reality, the most acceptable metaphor for the U.S. experience. Used so religiously for their salutary effect on the soul in New England sermons, these captivity narratives presented an exaggerated and emotionally heightened illustration of the moral and psychological situation of the primitive colonial and national community. Indian War psychology seemed to postulate only two avenues of response: passive submission or violent retribution. The third alternative of accommodation was conspicuously absent in the popular imagination.

Slotkin's identification of four basic mythological structures in our native heritage might serve as a complete index of almost every film made in the United States. He describes the four as follows:

- (1) *Conversion*: the soul encounters the transcendent, experiences affliction of spirit and salvation.
- (2) *Sacred Marriage*: the protagonist is united with female or 'other' who is the embodiment of nature as well as his own anima.
- (3) *Exorcism*: the protagonist is in conflict with the others. Those same beings—components of psychology, races, or powers—conceived as anima in the sacred marriage are treated as if they were representations of the id.
- (4) *Regeneration Through Violence*: the anima/ id conflict is embodied (not resolved) in a confrontation of male avatars in the wilderness.

At the risk of some oversimplification, it is fair to conclude that these mythic structures—which Slotkin views as fundamental structures of the U.S. consciousness—strongly parallel our culture's most persistent

fiction and film genres. The typical Gothic tale is a combination of the Conversion-Exorcism motif, a parable of violated innocence, repressed guilt and initiation into evil. In this sense, films as disparate as *IN COLD BLOOD*, *DELIVERANCE*, *THE EXORCIST*, and *THE GRADUATE* participate significantly in these categories of imaginative experience. The Sacred Marriage motif would encompass the entire spectrum of romance from *LOVE STORY* to *GONE WITH THE WIND*, and perhaps include such variants as *SCARECROW* and *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*.

The Regeneration Through Violence myth is the principal focus of Slotkin's study. While all four are essentially myths of initiation into the New World, this is preeminently the myth of the U.S. experience. At the most fundamental level the Western and the gangster film exploit this myth. Many films, *JEREMIAH JOHNSON*, for example, are laden with all four myths. But the implications of the violence myth go far beyond the mere exploration of narrative or filmic structures. It springs from the archetypal hunger myth, rooted especially in the figure of Daniel Boone, a mediating figure between civilization and the wilderness. He is consecrated to the destruction of savagery. But in the execution of that mission he comes to resemble his foe, the Indian. To survive he must adopt the tactics, the vision, and even the ethics of the Indian. The hunter-woodsman, even in the very act of extermination, acquires a sympathy and affinity for the Indian's way of life. In the act of subjugation, he participates in and absorbs the wilderness' creative power. The inherent paradox of the U.S. experience in mastering the new World contains a latent irony and a self-perpetuating moral flaw:

“Believing in the myth of regeneration through the violence of the hunt, the American hunters eventually destroyed the natural conditions that had made possible their economic and social freedom, their democracy of social mobility. Yet the mythology and the value system it supported remained even after the objective conditions that had justified it had vanished. We have, I think, continued to associate democracy and progress with perpetual social mobility (both horizontal and vertical) and with the continual expansion of our power into new fields or new levels of exploitation. Under the aspect of this myth, our economic, social, and spiritual life is taken to be a series of initiations, of stages in a movement outward and upward toward some transcendent goal. We have traditionally associated this form of aspiring initiation with the self-transcendence achieved by hunters through acts of predation. The forces of the environment and the hidden or dark sources of our personal and collective past—factors which limit our power to aspire and transcend—become the things which, as hunters, we triumph over, control, and transcend. They become, under the aspect of the myth, enemies and opponents, who captivate and victimize us and against whom we must be revenged.” (Slotkin, 557)

We harbor in our bones, if not in our conscious memory, an implicit

faith in the ultimate holiness of deeds of violence performed in the interests of some high moral purpose. We are inclined to expect that peace is earned at the expense of bloodshed, and Eden flourishes only after a conflict.

The film critic would find much grist his/ her mill, indeed, in examining the films of a director like San Peckinpah in the light of the Slotkin thesis. The explicit statements of Peckinpah the auteur concerning his intended critique of violence in our culture might be contrasted with the actual effect of his films. As Slotkin suggests, myth's essence is that it survives on the unconscious level. Lévi-Strauss makes a pertinent distinction between the logical mode of consciousness and the mythopoeic mode which Slotkin invokes to demonstrate the intrinsic power that mythology has over human behavior,

“reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors.”

Myth describes a process by which knowledge is transformed into power, more or less unconsciously. An analysis of the Peckinpah films on the mythopoeic level might perhaps conclude that the director's instinct as an artist is working in a different mode than his conscious intent. In spite of his verbal affirmations of an intended critique of violence, the films themselves reveal iconic patterns that tend to heroicize violence and implicitly seduce the audience into accepting the presented violence as a means to some higher purification, whether it be social regeneration or simply aesthetic catharsis.

Two recent films which demonstrate this perpetuation of the myth—in spite of explicit content which censures violence—are *THE KLANSMAN* and *DEATH WISH*. *THE KLANSMAN*, which exploits violence throughout, ends in a bloodbath which only the embryonic guerrillas survive. The film leaves the audience with the sinister implication that only cataclysmic violence can ultimately effect social change. *DEATH WISH* narrates the translation of the frontier justice myth to the urban jungle—a self-deputized vigilante cleanses society with a six-gun. Both of these films, while appearing to be exorcisms of evil forces, are in fact celebrations of violence as a means of social regeneration.

GARDEN IN THE WILDERNESS

The second half of Smith's *Virgin Land* focuses on the pastoral fulfillment of the myth of violence in the agrarian ideal of the garden in the wilderness—the country's dream in its initial conception of a “romance of the land.” Smith notes that the idyllic image of a Western utopia and of the yeoman farmer replaced the figure of the wild horseman of the desert plains in the masses' imagination after the Civil War. A landscape and a climate that had little to offer were suddenly endowed with great fructifying properties and infinite promise. Impacted poverty in the East and economic depression cast a sudden glow upon the West's unsettled land. The hand that struck the Indian a mortal blow now seized the land in a passionate grip. While the

freeholder's utopia was eventually aborted by the land speculator and the railroad monopolist, the dream as well as the caricature of the West survived. The idea of rural felicity is so persistent in U.S. consciousness that it has influenced our national foreign policy as well as our domestic farm policy, and it is subtly present in our most unconscious popular arts.

Leo Marx examines the same myth in his book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*. Like the frontier, the machine has been a compelling metaphor in U.S. consciousness, evoking both fascination and horror. When it intrudes into the garden in the wilderness—as it does so graphically in Inness' archetypal landscape "Lackawanna Valley" or in Emerson's early philosophy—it is often naturalized, absorbed into the naive pastoralism of the dominant myth. Marx delineates the rhetoric of the technological sublime. In its reconciliation of the machine with people, it unites art and nature as the railroad joins the city and country. If the vernacular mind saw no paradox in this reconciliation, the cultivated intelligence did. Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Adams, and Twain especially perceived the contradiction. Their works are saturated with exorcisms of the dream of mechanistic progress—and with evident ambivalence for the city which is its proper locus

U.S. film came into existence at that crucial point in time when the frontier had recently vanished, when the reality had receded into the past but the afterimage remained more vivid in the rearview mirror of popular imagination. It is to be expected, then, that early films would reflect the myth rather than the immediate reality. Cultural historians have noted that the country boy myth celebrating the sanctity of rural origins and society reached a crescendo in the popular mind at precisely that moment in time when the exodus to the cities reached its zenith. In an era when the audience consisted almost exclusively of city dwellers, the new popular genre of film seized upon the Western pastoral as its indispensable vehicle. The migration of movie production companies to the West Coast by 1910 accelerated the rise of the epic-panoramic Western in which outdoor scenes predominated and in which they played an important dramatic function. The early two-reel films flirted briefly with urban realism. *HERALD SQUARE*, *SKYSCRAPERS*, *CENTRAL PARK*, *THE GHETTO*, *10-CENT LODGING HOUSE*, and *DANCING ON THE BOWERY* fascinated early movie audiences. But during the twenties, the growing aspiration for the trappings of gentility and elite culture soon reduced the dimensions of the city film to "teacup drama" in which environment played no significant part, or to comedy which tended to deromanticize the environment.

Significantly, as the panoramic, technicolor tradition emerges out of the Western pastoral, so the return in the modern era to the stark black-and-white film is connected with the reappearance of the city and the urban environment in films. John Ford and Howard Hawks inhabit a Western pastoral-sublime mindscape, whereas a Wiseman or Scorsese emerges from the density and anguish of the modern city.

PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMERICA

The rise of the film in the United States recapitulates a pattern evident in the development of the daguerreotype. Richard Rudisill's illuminating study, *Mirror Image: The Influence of the Daguerreotype on American Society*, is very useful as background for film criticism. Rudisill notes that the primary function of the daguerreotype image in U.S. society was symbolic rather than purely documentary. In its tendency to emphasize the immediate moment, the direct activity and the particular person, it developed a self-conscious iconography of U.S. visual forms. These images, primarily idealizations of landscape, work and character, persist in subsequent graphic history. They predate the appearance of a more purely expository art. The daguerreotypist was a mythmaker celebrating the democratic ideal as it was represented in the physiognomy of the country and in the occupations of the common man. When the daguerreotypist accompanied Perry and Freemont across the continent his landscapes heroicized the prospect of frontier expansion and reinforced the spirit of manifest destiny.

The history of the film suggests many parallels, and Rudisill's work offers several avenues of exploration. The tendency to heroicize common individuals, which is characteristic of U.S. popular literature as well as of the daguerreotypist's art, is also a special characteristic of the film industry itself. Thus the highlighted expressiveness of the daguerreotypist's portraiture was imitated later by the close up in film, a phenomenon which is intimately and chronologically related to the rise of the star system in Hollywood.

Even when the daguerreotype was displaced by its successors—the tintype, paper print, and modern photo—the influence of documentary innovators like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine was delayed because of the symbolic-mythic function which the photographic image had acquired in our society. (One notes parenthetically that contemporary cinema verite originated in a foreign culture and is an imported rather than indigenous influence in U.S. film.) The fundamentally mythic function of film in our society is perhaps most obvious in the appearance of the romantic musical in Depression era movies. These parables of romantic fantasy and dreamlike opulence were an escape hatch for the audiences of the 30s who preferred the movie palaces to the grim scenes being recorded by the EPA documentarians.

William Stott's *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* is in many respects a complementary volume to Rudisill's study of the daguerreotype. Stott underscores the mythic, even polemic and didactic function of the documentary impulse in the communicative arts and especially in the photography of the 30s. While ostensibly artifacts of objective realism, nevertheless the photographs from the Farm Security Administration project, under Roy Stryker, tend to ennoble and sentimentalize common subjects, at times nationalize them (e.g. Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*). This tendency toward covert moralism and exploitation that Stott finds in the decade's

reportage has a certain resonance is the cinema of the period. Yet, there is a quality discernible in the best work of Walker Evans and James Agee that foreshadows the visual empathy of a film like Bogdanovich's *THE LAST PICTURE SHOW*. Stott's well-documented study is a rich mine of information on a style that has been given a special nuance by national consciousness, a work that is exceptionally relevant to the critique of the visual arts.

SUCCESS MYTH

If the myth of regeneration through violence was the earliest articulation of the American dream, then the myth of transcendence through accumulation of wealth—the success myth—was a late nineteenth century transformation of the same value. Like the frontier, success has been a compelling metaphor in the national psyche. Most often it has been translated into the pursuit of money, into undisguised greed. The success ethic had its origins, however, in the self improvement doctrines of the Puritans and the early libertarians. Emerson translated it into self reliance. Horatio Alger converted it into social and economic mobility. Andrew Carnegie interpreted it as the Gospel of Wealth. and Norman Vincent Peale called it *The Power of Positive Thinking*. John G. Cawelti has traced the metamorphosis of the success myth in his excellent study of popular culture, *Apostles of the Self-Made Man*. While his work focuses on the nineteenth century, Lawrence Chenoweth's *The American Dream of Success* carries the same inquiry into the twentieth century.

The researcher interested in assessing this aspect of the national character will discover an abundant supply of probing studies, most of which are indebted directly or indirectly to Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. What should be of great significance to the film critic is this myth's intensity and saturation in our society and its obvious effects on the social construction of reality. At the subliminal level, the dream has been a nightmare. This is evident in the treatment of the success theme in our best writers and in our most serious films. If contemporary Hollywood film assumes an ambience of affluence, it is gratuitously posited. The upward mobility theme which it supports is often a dubious and precarious achievement. Whether it is some kind of law of gravity (what goes up must come down), or a kind of tribal murder motivated by the envy of the masses, the hubris of superfluous success is usually punished in films (*CITIZEN KANE*, *ALL THE KINGS MEN*, *THE ARRANGEMENT*). *THE GODFATHER*, like hundreds of films in the same genre, is a paradigm of Robert Warshaw's theory in *The Immediate Experience* that the gangster—the shadow-self of the common man—is the guilt projection of the masses who have bought the success ethic. The taint of opportunism, of covert illegality and immorality, clings to the image of the self-made man in the popular arts like some kind of aboriginal curse. Only the underdogs, the have nots—tramps and sharecroppers, hippies and hookers, truck drivers and cops, cowboys and G.I.'s—can be the real heroes of Hollywood film. Their successes (if they are successful) are usually untainted by money; they

are moral achievements. COOL HAND LUKE is the anti-type of THE GODFATHER.

POPULAR HEROES

This strange ambivalence which the U.S. public reveals in its affection for its “great men” is apparent in the fluctuating cycles of the public’s identification with various occupations. Theodore Greene has described this phenomenon in his fascinating work, *American Heroes: A Study of the Changing Models of Success in American Magazines*. In documenting the various occupations of typical fictional protagonists from 1787 to 1918, a recurring pattern is evident. Namely, there’s a kind of waxing and waning rhythm in the level of audience identification and approval. Thus the heroes of the heroic occupations in one decade are often the villains of the next era. In the early Republic, statesmen and clergymen dominated the public’s reading interest—Greene calls them the “idols of order.” As their popularity declines after 1820 (Greene leaps from 1820 to the 1890s when the magazine revolution was in full swing), these proto-heroes are replaced by the “idols of power”: creative geniuses in the arts, entrepreneurs, tycoons, potentates and dictators—doers. They in turn are succeeded by the “idols of justice”: politicians, muckraking journalists and progressive philanthropists. Later come the “idols of organization,” 1914 to 1918: corporation managers, government bureaucrats, military men. Greene’s study ends with 1918, but in an appendix to his book, Chenoweth provides a similar analysis of the twentieth century.

The patterns traced by Greene and Chenoweth seem to parallel the structural paradigm examined by Northrop Frye in his study of popular myth in literature. The evolution of the typical protagonist of the Western genre seems to trace a diachronic curve from epic hero to antihero. The genre’s later stages function as a kind of parody or exorcism of the prototype’s romantic excesses (witness the ironic relation of LITTLE BIG MAN and MIDNIGHT COWBOY to the typical Western).

If the Western film celebrated the horizontal nobility of the hero, another large segment of U.S. films celebrates vertical mobility—the “occupational” types classified in Greene and Chenoweth. Like most of their variants in popular culture, these heroes are ephemeral idols. They suffer the same pejoration as the epic figures of old, and as we have suggested, from the very beginning of their appearance in film. The war films are perhaps the classic example of this antipodal movement of mythic character. In the early war films documentary realism is an artificial accretion, mere newsreel sequences spliced into heroicized treatment of men and battles. Most war films end with a propagandistic, patriotic apotheosis. After the war, the documentary influence is more honest and certainly a more integral part of the filmic method. The war films acquire a less romantic and a more mimetic quality. With THE VICTORS, the genre turns ironic. It reaches a kind of zenith in CATCH-22, where the documentary impulse exploits naturalistic detail in order

to heighten the sense of the grotesque and absurd.

The critic, in approaching an assessment of U.S. film, is confronted not only with three dimensions related to the art, as Escarpit suggests, but also with a social context which is itself multi-dimensional. National society—like the filmmaker, the script writer, the cinematographer—operates on several different wave lengths at the same time. Thus, thinking, feeling and doing are going on simultaneously, but these operations are often moving in opposite directions. If ideas impel us in one direction, motion may compel our concentration in another—and the act of doing itself may diminish or qualify the intensity of both. A film, like any cultural expression or gesture, is a bundle of these complex energies intersecting at a given point in time. It is an event, rather than an art object, and as such commands a systematic and comprehensive critique.

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JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

Reading and thinking about the avant-garde

by Chuck Kleinhans

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According to my dictionary,

“Avant-garde is the advance group in any field, esp. in the visual, literary, or musical arts, whose works are characterized chiefly by unorthodox and experimental methods.”

Fair enough. We might add, recalling that the term is originally a military one (the first unit to advance and engage the enemy), that the avant-garde is usually combative. Of course the artistic avant-garde is usually combative not towards the common enemy of all the arts (whatever that might be), but rather towards the bulk of artistic production. Being in advance, the concept of an avant-garde presumes something behind: qualitatively, quantitatively, and temporally. Thus the idea of the avant-garde tends to assume that the main body will someday catch up with where the avant-garde is today, and that by that time the vanguard will have moved on to a new position.

READING ABOUT THE NORTH AMERICAN AVANT-GARDE

Living in Chicago last summer, I could read about the avant-garde a lot more easily than I could see avant-garde films. This says something: that few, people on this continent except in Manhattan, and perhaps the San Francisco Bay area, have access to avant-garde films (or, if you prefer: underground, experimental, personal, lyrical, or specificities like New American Cinema, or structural film, or names from Deren to Wieland).

Except for a few little pockets of aficionados who screen experimental films—often short lived groups—hardly anyone can really see such films, study them, appreciate them. While avant-garde filmmakers and publicists periodically proclaim that these films are widely seen, they shouldn't fool anyone. Such ceremonial proclamations, like graduation day speeches, have no bearing on reality. In pragmatic terms, a

Hitchcock or Borzage freak can see more films more often than a devotee of Kenneth Anger or Bruce Baillie.

And since so few can see avant-garde films, it is understandable (though surely not admirable) that critical put-downs by the uninformed carry a considerable weight. Interested in innovative films, I found myself caught up in the publicist/denigrator syndrome, alternately reading the ritualized murk of cultists and the snide stupidities of critics who have seen one (if that) Brakhage film and then feel qualified to generalize and dismiss (an action roughly equivalent to discussing Welles authoritatively after seeing only the first five minutes of *CITIZEN KANE*). In any case, living outside of Manhattan, I fell back on print, and began reading about the U.S. avant-garde.

ONE: CRANKS AND CATALOGUES

“Do I contradict myself? very well,
I contradict myself.”
—Walt Whitman

The most prevalent type of film book on U.S. avant-garde films is the catalogue or anthology. Such collections have their usefulness (you'd feel embarrassed at not having them on your bookshelf if really into avant-garde film), especially for quick reference, but they tend to be indiscriminate. The frankest approach to this problem is Jonas Mekas, for he celebrates his self-perceived role as publicist:

“It is not my business to tell you what it's all about. My business is to get excited about it, to bring it to your attention. I am a raving maniac of the cinema.”

In *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema, 1959-1971*, a collection of his *Village Voice* articles, he takes full advantage of being at the center of a growing film movement. He combines raves, anecdotes, polemics against this or that aspect of the establishment, and gossip. The book gains from having a chronological sequence, which allows a glimpse of history. (Taken alone, week by week, I've always found his columns of primary interest only if one is really into the latest New York thing. West of the Hudson, Mekas shares with the *Voice* its weekly Manhattan provincialism.) Since Mekas disarms one's reservations by celebrating his own limits, he leaves little to say, and also little to think about: good reading on public transportation.

Sheldon Renan's *An Introduction to the American Underground Film* has a slightly different approach with approximately the same end. Basically it catalogues the New American Cinema up to 1966, and it provides an overview of what was happening. But Renan's attempts at criticism have all the tautological finesse of the Flower Children's proclamations:

“The new man is an explorer of ways of seeing and of existing. He is essentially responsible not to society but to

himself. His goal is the fulfillment of his own individual vision, not the playing of a societal role. Ideally, the new man seem more, feels more, is willing to experience more than the 'conventional man.' He is the new species for a new age and be is prepared for a future that will witness unprecedented changes ... It is the world of the new man, almost a separate society of sympathetic individuals, that provides the primary audience for these films. For, with his commitment to freedom and individuality in a time of increasing imprisonment by standardization, the new man has necessarily been an underground man."

This statement could stand for a thousand others uttered by the bulk of avant-gardists and their intellectual groupies. No awareness that the ideas are over 150 years old. No consciousness that Dostoyevsky said something about the "underground man." No awareness that for those below the upper middle class, selfishness is hardly a viable way of life.

Gene Youngblood's *Expanded Cinema* has the same advantages and disadvantages as the catalogue approach. Youngblood in some ways matches Renan's "gee whiz" enthusiasm while showing evidence of wider reading. In the footnotes J.R. Pierce, Norbert Weiner, and Ludwig Wittgenstein bump up against Buckminster Fuller, Krishnamurti, and Marshall McLuhan. Youngblood's critical amalgam finds its level at about that of Hermann Hesse, Alvin Toffler, and Norman O. Brown. However, Youngblood's analysis of video experiments, computer films, intermedia, and all the rest of the expansion of traditionally conceived cinema in the late 60s contains a good deal of hard thought, if you can get beyond the quaintly dated jargon of the period. Frankly, I have a hard time doing so, and I haven't finished the book, being stopped by laughter almost every time I pick it up with the first line of the author's biography: "Gene Youngblood became a passenger of *Spaceship Earth* on May 30, 1942."

Also in the catalogue series is David Curtis's *Experimental Cinema*. Although Curtis seems to offer a history, he really gives a chronology which begins with the post-WW1 European avant-garde and which ends up with what I'd tentatively call post-New American Cinema. (There doesn't seem to be general agreement on terms yet. Some favor minimal film and structural film, but these refer to smaller groups within the avant-garde phenomenon.) While his information is useful, too often you sense Curtis hasn't seen the film, or when he has, that he hasn't the ability to describe it. For example, he writes of Jack Smith's FLAMING CREATURES:

"The static camera allows the viewer to appreciate the Delacroix-like chance compositions that the creatures adopt."

Did anyone ever think of Delacroix having chance compositions?

Two anthologies on avant-garde film have the problem and rewards of

all anthologies. P. Adams Sitney's collection in the *Film Culture Reader* gives an overview of the theoretical organ of the New American Cinema, while Gregory Battcock's *The New American Cinema* achieves a wider range of views by including some less than mediocre essays.

The catalogue and anthology approaches have their usefulness. Yet none of the above-mentioned books really gives a synthetic overview or faces deeper critical problems raised by avant-garde films. Youngblood comes close, but his veneer of hip style and indiscriminate reference to *ex cathedra* statements by a mixed bag of thinkers obscures his own valid insights. It was with relief, then, that I read Parker Tyler's *Underground Film*. With all of his drawbacks (frequent crankiness, quixotic judgments, slippery style), the former resident intellectual of the New York pre-New American Cinema scene has the good sense to try to get beyond filmmakers' and promoters' hype, to discriminate genuine from spurious innovation, and to relate the films under discussion to humanist concepts. When Tyler fails, he sounds like the John Simon of avant-garde criticism. When he succeeds you sense a person who looks at films and also at the world. And while I still can't account for, within Tyler's own framework, his appreciation of Warhol and his blindness to much of Brakhage, Tyler's well-grounded catholicity of taste and common sense make him the best thing to read about avant-garde film first.

TWO: SITNEY'S SHORTSIGHTED VISION

"Once everything has been run through—wither is one to run then? If all potential permutation were exhausted—what would follow? ... In any case, going round in a circle would be more probable than standing still."

- Nietzsche

Against the relative poverty of book-length criticism of avant-garde film, I can easily understand why P. Adams Sitney's *The Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde* was, as they say, "long-awaited" and hailed before publication. Essentially Sitney has written a serious, long, and somewhat academic study of what he perceives as the major line of development of the North American avant-garde from Maya Deren to Michael Snow. This sort of book fills the bulk of university press publication in the humanities. The author takes a subject and period, traces out its development with a close "reading" of the selected "texts." By the standards of art history or literary criticism, the book is definitely second rate. In the intellectually barren area of film studies, it is, by virtue of the competition, one of the more impressive recent English language film books.

Since selection and emphasis is crucial when the critic moves beyond compiling a catalogue, a list of Sitney's chosen filmmakers itself tells a lot about his orientation: Maya Deren, Sidney Peterson, James Broughton, Kenneth Anger, Gregory Markopoulos, Stan Brakhage, Bruce Baillie, Harry Smith, Jordan Belson, Robert Breer, Peter Kubelka,

Christopher MacLaine, Bruce Connor, Ron Rice, Robert Nelson, Ken Jacobs, Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Hollis Frampton. Someone familiar with experimental film would immediately note the omissions: Ed Emschwiller, Stan Vanderbeek, Storm De Hirsh, the Kuchar brothers, Andy Warhol, Joyce Wieland, and many more. Sitney defends his mission of major figures in order to “isolate and derive the visionary strain within the complex manifold of the American avant-garde film.” He doesn't claim to be exhaustive in his inductive-deductive process of analysis.

However, his selection predetermines his results and his prejudices predetermine his selection. I don't mean this as a carping criticism: it's always present as a critical dilemma. The question is not what Sitney selects, but the basis on which he selects. He explicitly states his bias in his preface: the filmmaker's commitment to “the major theoretical concerns” of the American avant-garde. Thereby he favors those who either wrote about their films, or who were frequently interviewed—that is, those who had access to the organs of publicity and/or felt their films didn't stand alone. These “major theoretical concerns, according to Sidney, are those which

“coincide with those of our post-Romantic poets and Abstract impressionist painters. Behind them lies a potent tradition of Romantic poetics.”

It's certainly a plausible approach, and Sitney can encapsulate about thirty years of experimental films into the rough progression of Anglo-American poetry from Wordsworth and Coleridge to Wallace Stevens and Charles Olson. What he *can't* explain is why that progression rather than another defines avant-garde film, or how that progression relates to anything outside of a series of formal choices. Sitney's problem begins with taking his understanding of “the tradition of Romantic poetics” over wholesale from literary critic Harold Bloom (*The Visionary Company*, *Yeats*, etc.) who is hardly the last word in literary criticism. The internal and formalist approach of Bloom hinders Sitney in constructing what he calls his “historical morphology” of the avant-garde North American film. History disappears.

In fact Sitney ends up with what could be called the internal art history approach to the avant-garde. He has an overriding concern with the internal development of form, and his method rests on a partial truth. To a certain extent the avant-garde evolves along the historical axis of film convention. That is, films generate films; films refer back to films. To this extent the approach is valid. However, the historian-critic him/herself affects film, both our understanding of it and future film production, by elevating some films and denigrating others.

Criticism enters into the historical process and limits not only the future, but also our understanding of the past and future. Further, by using this internal historical approach, Sitney tends to look for connections where there are parallels, lineage where there is sequential similarity, and sources where there are simple antecedents. Thus the

critic creates a pattern and imposes a succession that is more important than the contradictions, backsliding, and uneven development that make up the reality of avant-garde film history. The effect is to re-order, to re-impose, in fact to deny the very individuality—the singular notion of creative genius—at the heart of Romantic aesthetics.

We can look at Sitney's method at work in his chapter on Kenneth Anger, "The Magus":

"Formally. SCORPIO RISING's precursor (by a few years at most) was Bruce Connor's second film, COSMIC RAY. Whether or not Anger has seen the film is hardly relevant here, as I can hardly believe it had a direct influence upon him. Nevertheless, Connor should be credited as the first film maker to employ ironically a popular song as the structural unit in a collage film ... The structure of the ideas evoked by Connor's collage is straightforward; unlike Anger's film, there is no room for ambiguity in COSMIC RAY."

Sitney is too sophisticated to try to find a direct influence here, but COSMIC RAY still comes off as a "precursor." Its importance does not lie in itself as an aesthetic object but in its role as a "first" in the "historical morphology." More significantly, note the creeping assumption at the end of the paragraph. There's a seemingly natural or automatic development from "straightforward" to "ambiguity." While Sitney doesn't explicitly place a value on this change, he mentions it—and similar changes—again and again. After 435 pages, a vast field has been arranged in a linear and basically ascending way from Deren to Snow, Sharits, and Frampton (even in the last chapter, you sense that Sharits is "further along" than Snow, and Frampton, more "avant" than Sharits).

As questionable as this ascending spire of form is, worse yet, Sitney becomes the victim of his own scheme when he cannot explain what he describes:

"In the sequence of Anger's films, there is an evolution of forms from the late forties through the sixties which will recur again and again in the works of his contemporaries. The shift is from the trance film to the mythopoeic film. Both forms assert the primacy of the imagination; the first through dream, the second through ritual and myth."

The most sympathetic reader is stumped at this point, for Sitney cannot explain *why* this happened. Did the trance film expend and exhaust itself? Is myth and ritual a higher level of understanding than dream? Was there an intellectual shift from Freudian psychology to Jungian? We don't know, and Sitney never tells us, but just moves on to recording core changes, although sometimes he has to note discrepancies in his modal of development:

"The cases of Peterson and Broughton are exceptional; they

do not fit the pattern neatly, but that is because the former stopped making films in 1949 and the latter left the medium for so long before returning to it.”

Is that really an adequate explanation? If Broughton and Peterson had continued to make films without interruption, would their films really have then fallen into Sidney’s rather neo-platonic pattern of history? And on a more human level, how would Peterson and Broughton feel about not fitting on Sitney’s Procrustean bed?

Sitney’s exclusive concentration on the internal formal changes in the avant-garde leads him to take too much at face value or less: most notably the self-statements of avant-gardists. For example, he quotes Anger’s Alister Crowleyesque statements and then seems unable to know what to do with them: neither accepting them as true nor rejecting them as absurd, when the statements themselves force either an embrace or rejection on the reader’s part. Whatever a critic thinks of Anger’s films as objects, if he or she is going to quote Anger’s intentions, he or she is then obligated to accept them, dismiss them, or find some rationalization for them, such as their being “metaphoric.” Sitney simply reports them and with classic liberalism insults both Anger and the reader. More inexcusably, Sitney reports Brakhage’s remarks on his film *SIRIUS REMEMBERED* where the filmmaker expresses his frustration with friends who were blind to the decaying body of the filmmaker’s dead dog, Sirius, and also uncomprehending of his film about death, *SIRIUS REMEMBERED*, using the image of the animal’s corpse. Sitney, in effect, joins the friends by treating the film as a formal exercise and repressing the meditation on death at the heart of the film.

The purely internal approach also gives Sitney problems in other areas. When discussing Deren, he never mentions one of the biggest problems most audiences have with her films: the residing realism of the way we all interpret cinematography. For all of her talent, Deran’s cinematography is horribly “realistic” given her aims. We tend to interpret Deren’s use of 16mm, black and white stock with conventional lenses and relatively conventional lighting as “realistic,” especially when we can read the style codes of costume and hairstyle as belonging to a very specific time. These visual conventions are so strong that they often cannot be overcome by Deran’s experiments in editing, camera movement, and printing. Thus for all its other virtues, *RITUAL IN TRANSFIGURED TIME*, from one point of view, is simply silly and altogether too earnest for its visuals. Passages of it come off as Isadora Duncan transferred to film—a miserably wrong medium for that kind of dance. Kenneth Anger presents the same aesthetic problem: his limited resources and limited ability with camera, lighting and costuming genuinely inhibit his ability to get his conceptions into a form that audiences who are neither slavish cultists nor intimidated viewers can accept. (My own suspicion, that inept camera and mise en scene form Anger’s finally inexcusable flaw, was confirmed when I saw Susan Pitt Kraning’s *JEFFERSON CIRCUS SONGS*, which succeeds through skill exactly where Anger fails.)

The saving grace of Sidney's book—his long and detailed description of the films—will make it well worth the price if it comes out in paperback. But as Sitney's formal parade of films marches on page after page, the limits of his method become more and more apparent. He doesn't see the possibility that the changes he notes in "visionary film" may themselves stem from the inadequacy of Romantic aesthetics, and that the exploration and moving on to something else by his chosen filmmakers, which he uses to structure his "historical morphology," may stem from the inability of the "visionary" mode to transcend the aesthetic problems it explores. There is a possibility that from Deren to Frampton these filmmakers are not making any progress but only wandering in circles in the desert of visionary Romanticism.

I find the most curious lack in all of Sitney's books his complete refusal to ever evaluate anything he describes. We never learn if he thinks one film is better than another (except that some fit his scheme better than others), or even if he finds a film good. This unconscious parody of scientific objectivity leaves the reader to wonder, or to grasp at comparisons. For example, on Brakhage's DOG STAR MAN:

"The resolution of the film is not a Blakean liberation into Eden and reunion of the imaginative and physical division. Brakhage at this point follows the post-Romantic substitution of tautology for liberation. In their major poems, "Un Coup de Des" and "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," Mallarmé and Stevens triumphantly proclaim the failure of the divine within or without man; instead they posit a teleology of poetry, and in their wake Brakhage ends his film with a naked affirmation of his materials and his mechanics."

It's true. I can accept that Brakhage is doing in film what Mallarmé and Stevens were doing in poetry. But does Sitney mean us to understand that Brakhage is the artistic peer of Mallarmé and Stevens? But Sitney will neither come out with that claim, nor clarify and qualify by giving us an evaluation of DOG STAR MAN. One grasps for the unabashed prejudices of far less serious and thoughtful critics. Why does Sitney in this book avoid coming to value judgments, especially when his earlier criticism used then? One can only speculate, so I will. The purely internal and purely formal consideration of the avant-garde, if it moves beyond description and analysis to judgment, must find formal sophistication inherently good, and the solving of formal problems a positive accomplishment in all cases. Behind this notion lies one side of Romantic aesthetics: the artist as individual creator. (The other side, fallen into oblivion since Victor Hugo on the Continent, is artist as public oracle ... though the United States, always late, has Whitman, and amiable eccentrics like Ginsberg who still believe it.)

Critic Peter Sainsbury has pointed out in *Afterimage* 2 that with the notion of the artist as individual creator, film is conceived as "a self-sufficient, existential act and ... self-expression is in itself a value fit to combat a standardized and industrialized society and its cinema."

Sainsbury goes on to give an explanation of the avant-garde trend that Sitney's book describes without explaining:

“While the function of art is reversed in the age of mechanical reproduction, from a basis in ritual to a basis in politics, the reactionary nature of the avant-garde dictates that its central concern must be with the relation of perception and phenomena and not with that of theory and essence. So as it matures, in its own terms, it becomes increasingly concerned with questions of formal structure.”

“The critical rhetoric of Sitney, Mekes, Renan and others follows fast behind this tendency. The merit of Brakhage is to have ‘achieved’ the lyric sound film; of Snow to have explored a single unit of film vocabulary; of Jacobs to have remade an old film (perceived by the Artist to be a work of Genius) in a modern spirit. Every aesthetic problem is resolved within aesthetic categories, and sensory perception is raised to the level of cognition. Hence the contention that vision is fundamentally eyesight. In this framework the significance of every art work is lost or disguised in concepts such as ‘creativity,’ ‘genius,’ ‘eternal value’ and ‘mystery’ which would, in Benjamin’s words, ‘facilitate the processing of data in the fascist sense.’ For in the last analysis this criticism would have more to do with the aesthetics of politics than with the politics of art. And in the advent of a polarization of politics, where would the avant-garde film-makers stand?”

The formalist art history method Sitney uses has a certain usefulness in arranging and rediscovering works from the past that were overlooked or underrated in their own time. But this method frequently has a pernicious effect in the present and immediate future. The films which established critics of the avant-garde deems important get screened and the others do not. It is the vicious trap well described by art critic Harold Rosenberg in which formal innovation becomes the principal and often the only criterion for new art, and novelty is taken as sufficient by critic and maker:

“Having a place in art history is *the* value; through attaining this place, the work’s own qualities become part of the standards by which the work is judged. ... Splitting form from substance, this approach has prevailed largely through its usefulness in providing a coherent account of the development of modern art out of the art of the past. The effect has been to normalize the new and thus reduce antagonism to it.”

The film critic becomes an art historian educating readers to be amateur art historians of cinema, appreciating avant-garde films as contributions to the evolution of forms, and reducing filmmaking creativity to caking the next film in the linear development of forms. No detours, please. In

pursuit of an “historical morphology,” history is lost.

THINKING ABOUT THE AVANT-GARDE

Typically, discussions of avant-garde films are historically and socially shortsighted. They may track backwards in film history and move laterally into current society, but they seldom go any further. Because criticism of the avant-garde film has so limited a perspective, we should try to see the subject in the larger context of the avant-garde as a general artistic phenomenon in modern times. As a critic, I face a problem in attempting this. Because the term “avant-garde” is relative, everyone may not agree even about what is being discussed. The solution, obviously, requires a very careful historical study. While that is much needed, here I will offer some generalizations which neglect the exceptions and the fabric of history in order to gain a tentative historical perspective on the filmic avant-garde. I intend what follows as an external macroanalysis to counter the typical internal microanalysis of criticize of avant-garde films.

ONE: FROM REVOLUTION TO REACTION

“[With the introduction of mechanical reproduction] art reacted with the doctrine of art for art’s sake, that is with a theology of art. This gave rise to what might be called a negative theology in the form of the idea of pure art, which not only denied any social function of art, but also any categorizing by subject matter.”—Walter Benjamin,

“We know very well that pure art and empty art are the main thing and that aesthetic purism was a brilliant maneuver of the bourgeois of the last century who preferred to see themselves denounced as philistines rather than as exploiters.”—Jean-Paul Sartre

The avant-garde hasn't always been with us; in fact it didn't exist as a concept or as a fact until the latter 19th century. The existence of the avant-garde as a phenomenon has historical preconditions: the rise and triumph of capitalism as an economic system, the bourgeoisie as a class, industrialization as a mode of production, urbanization as a social ordering, liberal democracy as a means of governance, and Romanticism as the dominant art movement. As these changes took place in the West during the 18th and 19th centuries, the nature and function of art in society changed.

Before Romanticism, art belonged to a special elite of the educated and intelligent members of the ruling order, and not to the people at large, except for public arts such as architecture and folk art. The Romantic movement and the avant-garde movements that followed in its wake revolted against traditionally received and sanctioned high culture, represented most clearly by the academies. European Romanticism flowered simultaneously with the creation of modern mass culture. For the first time art was popularized and commercialized, becoming an

integral part of market production.

The result—mass culture—distinguishes itself primarily by its commodity nature. The production and distribution of art becomes economically profitable. The art public is no longer the elite of the cultivated—the audience for classical humanism—but a public market: everyone with a penny for a broadsheet, a dime for a novel, a shilling for a show. Coming later, the avant-garde inherits Romanticism's opposition to classical humanism and adds its own opposition to modern mass culture. Thus the avant-garde, poised against classics and commercials, is isolated from all social strata but a segment of the intelligentsia and a few patrons who provide an irregular and unreliable audience.

As a result, the avant-garde exists only in a negative and somewhat hopeless relation to the general society, and its stance of *épater la bourgeoisie* is hardly a positive program for artistic reform. To define itself against the dominant bourgeois culture, the avant-garde has to acknowledge the bourgeoisie as a public, or as part of a public. It cannot negate that public out of existence. Similarly, it can and must be anti-traditional, but it tends to form its conventions in directly inverse relation to traditional conventions. Additionally, in reaction against what it perceives as the escapism and vulgarization of mass art, it raises the unique and individual art work as a paramount value and carries individuality to its logical end. At the same time, without noticing the contradiction, it tends to assume that the public can be brought around, can be transformed by viewing avant-garde art, which negates the purely aesthetic end that it claims. Its ethos of individualism tends to a kind of bourgeois revolutionary response to the dilemmas it feels.

Within the context of this situation, the avant-garde serves as an opposition culture, a negating art. The very conditions of modern society create the conditions which allow for the emergence of an avant-garde. It comes into being and exists as the negation of a general and dominant culture by a specific one. But in the last case, the avant-garde cannot negate art nor society but only continue in an exacerbated relation to art and society until society itself changes. How does this opposition take shape? Since the most basic characteristic of art in bourgeois society is its commodity nature—that it is marketed—the avant-garde almost always, and almost by definition, strives to overcome this primary quality by creating a product free from the taint of the marketplace. But such a withdrawal is finally impossible. (The inverse strategy—such as Pop Art's capturing the market—negates the advanced quality of the avant-garde.) So, because we live in a bourgeois epoch, the avant-garde exists as a negating art, yet it characteristically exhibits a deep unwillingness to face the realities of modern commercial life.

The avant-garde depends for its existence on an ideology of individualism. The avant-garde attempts to negate the social values of art and change the art experience into something private. All epochs prior to the bourgeois epoch essentially understood art as a social fact,

even when its society was a tiny elite, and if it was made by an individual. Only in the bourgeois period do we assume that the function and meaning of art is private, unique, and individual. Though the European Romantic movement expressed the ideology of bourgeois individualism, the Romantics spoke as public individuals, addressing society in general. The avant-garde has chosen the voice of a private individualism, speaking to a coterie. The difference is profound.

After (and sometimes during) the Romantic movement the artist was not sure of his/her public. Originally Romanticism served as the cultural arm of the bourgeoisie's rise to power; once risen, the bourgeoisie institutionalized that original thrust of Romanticism. What was once revolutionary (that is, bourgeois revolutionary) became part of the status quo. With opposition culture becoming dominant, the forward historical movement or "advance" of culture then became the business of vanguardism: a thrusting into the future by a small alike group that denied any gradual evolution or spontaneous advance of art. The first impulse for the avant-garde came from an almost subliminal understanding of bourgeois cultural hegemony. So, the avant-garde is an opposition movement, by nature, but not necessarily revolutionary.

The avant-garde sees itself as a wedge into the future, and frequently falls back on (implicitly) the model of French Impressionism in painting: the belief that the public eventually accepts what is avant-garde at one time, the new movement gradually winning and triumphing. But this is an unreliable model, for many more avant-gardes fail than win public acceptance. In particular, no film avant-garde has won public acceptance, though some have won a place in film history.

Avant-gardes in all the arts have several consistent characteristics. Avant-garde art is anti-mass, anti-public, anti-commercial, anti-tradition (except for its own tradition of innovation), anti-bourgeois. In this it faces a constant dilemma of marginality. As part of its negative self-definition, it tends to assume that the inverse is better, but it is left only sarcastic and undefined attacks on establishment art. Perpetually caught in the newness/ fashion syndrome, the avant-garde seeks to impose a new norm, but once that norm is accepted—even within its prescribed audience—it abandons the standard. Within the commercial system, fashion tends to function in a field of stylistic pluralism to standardize taste and to stimulate an artificial (and profitable) change, the artistic equivalent of planned obsolescence. The avant-garde does not so much fight within the field of stylistic pluralism to win but chooses stylistic dissent as sufficient. Since the avant-garde's natural public itself is marginal in society, the avant-garde itself is extremely attenuated in relation to society.

The situation of the avant-garde artist is similar. Living within a market system, society views the artist as a parasite and a consumer since his/her work has no clear market value. In fact the artist is a worker and a producer, but tends not to see him/herself that way or to be seen that

way. The usual ideology for artists is to accept a definition as a self-employed professional in order to counter society's definition. Thus within art schools, the painters are ranked at the top—and the graphic designers at the bottom, in direct reversal of the use value which normally governs social ordering under capitalism.

Finally, among the characteristics of the avant-garde we can see its inability to overcome the basic social and political problems it faces—most obviously the state and institutional pressures of censorship and economics. In a usual avant-garde response, the artist turns his/her inability to confront these problems into a false virtue or considerable self-pity. Thus the avant-garde periodically complains about censorship (e.g. Jack Smith's *FLAMING CREATURES* in the early 60s) by a state representing a public the avant-garde has scorned. And it continuously complains about not receiving state patronage or institutional patronage.

Avant-garde artists' attempts to resolve these problems are typically ineffectual. On the one hand they attempt freedom from the marketplace by withdrawal which then condemns them to irrelevance ... the freedom of ineffectuality. They cannot really attempt success—that is, capturing the marketplace—and have done so only under peculiar market conditions, such as Pop Art, or the Warhol phenomenon in film. At the same time they can exist commercially only by producing art which is merchandise, and they tend to live on the hope of a future market, a future merchant, a future audience. Caught in a floating ambiguity, their art tends to extremes: a pure subjectivity that loses touch with the concrete and becomes ungeneralizable, or an abstractionism that also loses the concrete and any sense of history. The avant-garde artist is held back in all cases by his/her ethos of individualism. And it is only in some limited ways (distribution co-ops, etc.) and not in the films themselves that they have overcome their arch-individuality.

Of course reality is not as clear cut as the previous generalizations. Artists and distributors have in fact quasi-resolved some of the persistent problems of the avant-garde. The museum, the cooperative distribution outlets, and the alternate galleries, the film clubs, etc., have created a certain marginal alternative to the marketplace. In response to the dealer/ promoter situation which rests on the crassest capitalist idea that aesthetic value equals market value, an alternate system for the avant-garde minimally provides some free space. However, in the end it simply sublimates rather than challenges the commercial reality of art in our culture.

TWO: AVANT-GARDE ART AND VANGUARD POLITICS

“In any country art is accepted as realistic so long as it accords with principles which are familiar to the people of that country. Are we right in regarding Egyptian art as formalist? It is often considered to be stylized, but the Egyptians regarded its conventions as indispensable.”—

Vesevold Meyerhold

“Art is one form of human relations and, for that reason, it depends on those factors which determine human relations in general.”—Bertolt Brecht

Any realistic survey of avant-garde film is bound to sound pretty pessimistic in political terms. But a great deal of what is true about the avant-garde's position in U.S. society also pertains to militant political cinema: miniscule relative audiences, appeal to a self-confirming group which is marginal to society, highly suspect ability to effect change, etc., etc.. Which is to say the problems of radical “aesthetic” cinema and radical “political” films are not so far apart, and exploring one should give some clues to considering the other.

The artistic avant-garde did not always stand apart from the political avant-garde. Naturalism combined the two, as did early Soviet experimentalism and surrealism (though rather uneasily for both sides in the latter two cases). On the other hand, Italian futurism enthusiastically embraced fascism, and German fascism officially condemned expressionism while taking over its methods for propaganda purposes. Aside from such direct links, every avant-garde has proclaimed it would change the world by changing consciousness through art. That claim is beginning to look pretty ridiculous now. For example, in 1966 Jonas Mekas spoke for the New American Cinema when he said:

“We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that. Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we have to improve ourselves: that only through the beauty of our own selves can we beautify the others. Our work, therefore, our most important work at this stage is ourselves. Our protest and our critique of the existing order of life can be only through the expansion of our own being. We are the measure of all things. And the beauty of our creation, of our art, is proportional to the beauty of ourselves, of our souls.”

Nine years later if we ask what the New American Cinema attained along these lines, it looks as having been as significant in changing the world as Guru Maharaji Ji and other spiritual hula hoops.

The pluralism that is a structural feature of liberal bourgeois society creates the situation in which exceptional art can arise. At the same time, that pluralism finally only tolerates ineffective dissent. For example, in a one-dimensional society, television rapidly co-opted formal innovation in film. I'm told some of Brakhage's films have been purchased for study by advertising agencies eager to keep TV commercials fresh. Avant-gardists don't often consider the problem of how their works can indeed break with the dominant culture and have some kind of lasting social significance.

While avant-gardists tend to be perversely naive about politics, the left has been equally opaque about the avant-garde. Since examples of left blindness to new art are rather well known, let me offer a little-known example of a leftist flexible enough to change his opinion. In 1921 Lenin wrote a letter to Lunacharsky, Commissar for Education, denouncing the latter's decision to print 5,000 copies of Mayakovsky's avant-garde poem, "150,000,000." "It is nonsense, stupidity, double-dyed stupidity and affectation," Lenin wrote, urging no more than 1600 copies be published, and those "for libraries and cranks." He closed with the facetious suggestion that Lunacharsky "be flogged for his futurism." Later in the same year Lenin and Nadezhda Krupskaya, his wife, visited an art students' commune. Krupskaya recalled that the students slept on the bare floor and had no salt or bread. but great enthusiasm. Lenin asked them:

"What do you read? Do you read Pushkin?' 'Oh no,' said someone, 'after all he was a bourgeois; we read Mayakovsky.' Ilyich smiled. 'I think,' he said. that Pushkin is better.' After this Ilyich took a more favourable view of Mayakofsky. Whenever the poet's name was mentioned he recalled the young art students who, full of life and gladness, and ready to die for the Soviet system, were unable to find words in the contemporary language with which to express themselves, and sought the answer in the obscure verse of Mayakovsky. Later [Lenin] ... praised Mayakovsky for the verse in which he ridiculed Soviet red tape."

To the students, Mayakovsky's poems were new forms and new contents for a new consciousness, an argument Lenin was willing to accept, if not endorse.

This story has its limits for this discussion because it deals with a postrevolutionary situation, and in the U.S. present we have a prerevolutionary society. Recognizing this, from time to time the avant-garde justifies itself by claiming that its films will change consciousness, and that when enough consciousness and consciousnesses is/are changed, the revolution will take place. Art will make the revolution (though it hasn't made any so far in all of world history). And, after all, hasn't everyone had the experience of seeing some conventional film and then feeling afterwards that to some extent it changed their way of feeling and thinking? The avant-garde claims to do the same thing on a more regular basis. One reason why the avant-garde seems to change consciousness, apart from the hype of its publicists that it does so, comes from its appeal to middle class young adults—late adolescents and young professionals—who themselves are attaining maturity. Thus the disquieting strangeness in innovative films can seem to expand consciousness. The young audience finds appealing an art that induces a new state of mind in the spectator. This shock value makes the avant-garde look more important than it really is. A mere decade later the same film can look dated or have become well-assimilated.

But discussions of film changing consciousness have their limits unless they go into the much deeper and difficult questions of problems of defining “change” and “consciousness” and how we know such change has occurred, both on the individual and social level. Both avant-gardists and leftists tend to posit absolute answers to relative and historical questions about film and social change. The avant-gardist errs by assuming art and consciousness stand independent of social relations, while the political critic ignores the complex interaction of objective and subjective conditions that make revolution a continuous process, that both precedes and follows the act of taking state power.

With that said, there are several sympathetic approaches to avant-garde film from a left political perspective. The most common left defense of the avant-garde admits its inherent political limit: that the avant-garde appeals only to a small number of people who occupy a privileged, if marginal, position in society. The argument then goes on to find worth in those avant-garde productions which clearly critique the dominant culture, arguing that such an attack, even though limited, points towards a necessary social revolution. Thus the novels of Franz Kafka, according to left critics as divergent as Lucien Goldmann and Bertolt Brecht, show alienation in class society so profoundly that they implicitly indicate the need to radically transform that society. This view, while separating itself from the demand for verisimilitude, continues one of the key ideas of mainstream Marxist aesthetics (Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Lukács). This concept is that before the revolutionary transformation of bourgeois society into proletarian society, progressive art negates the given conditions of life in class society. Such art is “good” because it demonstrates the need to transform that society.

The left argument against this position falls back on the utilitarian view that art should serve the needs of the vanguard party (or, lacking an adequate left party, the “people’s struggles” or “relevance”). This position has an obvious appeal in relating art to immediate needs, even when it reduces art to a propagandistic function. It fails to recognize culture (in the broad anthropological sense, including art) as the very substance of social life that revolutionaries are trying to transform. At its worst, Socialist Realism as a concept of criticism assumes people live at their workplace, and thus women are mainly at home and children disappear, becoming non-persons. And even at its best, in practice, realism tends to sentimentalize, and therefore trivialize, the conditions it depicts.

A different sympathetic approach to avant-garde film lies in examining a relatively recent international trend of films which calls into question, largely through a radical form (and to a lesser extent a radical content), the very nature of film in our society. This trend stands in reaction to the dominant conception of film at present. With most documentary or fictional narration, the filmmaker unhesitatingly uses a kind of universal voice and uses film to speak with that voice. Narrative film uses its formal qualities to serve an end and hides the fact it does so. It captures reality, is a window on the world, mirrors the world, or presents drama

or character or whatever. But a filmmaker may use film as an object rather than an instrument in order to speak as an individual consciousness and conscience.

The two major styles of cinema—fictional narrative as most predominantly shaped and expressed by Hollywood, and also documentary—depend on narration and almost always a third-person narrative, which transforms what is seen on the screen into others, into objects, and which creates a kind of instant credibility. Accuracy, clarity, realism—these are not general and necessary qualities of cinema, but express the ideal of a certain kind of discourse, basically a persuading discourse. But one can reject the idea of being party to such a discourse, and use film itself as objective rather than instrumental. Then one can seize images in order to destroy their closed nature, to attack their function as discourse, to break apart the very idea of images establishing relations. All cinema utilizes a body of prescriptions and habits—in short, conventions—common to all the filmmakers of a period, avant-garde or not. A film about Film, as opposed to a film about that Something Else we call reality, reflects on the social usage of film form. Such a film exposes and comments on conventions. It attacks Taken-For-Granted Form, which rests on taken-for-granted conventions, which rest on taken-for-granted assumptions about art and society. Film can act as meta-film, a meta-commentary on film and on its function past and present. Such a film establishes a new kind of discourse, an exploratory discourse, perhaps even a dialectical discourse. In short, its end is epistemological.

The “open” film, the self-reflective and self-critical film, the film which forces a distanced, intellectual, rather than empathetic, emotional response—basically, I think we don't know enough about such films to say one way or the other if they can accomplish what they promise. Such films do increasingly demonstrate the limits of the cinema of identification and projection, of mystical participation, of disinterested pleasure, of sheer contemplation—in short, the narcotic cinema that by its very form and effect negates any radical content put into a film. It will take some time to see how much of this new cinema is novelty and how much is basic change. Clearly, too, form alone cannot move such epistemological cinema from its role as negating art to a positive challenge to the status quo of film and society. However such films raise the right questions, even if they do not clearly provide practical answers. (For an additional discussion of this type of film, see the articles by myself, Martin Walsh, and Julia Lesage in JUMP CUT 4.)

If we take as an assumption that one principal value of radical film is that it can (might) increase human potentials, particularly in opposition to the deadening and limiting nature of bourgeois film, then we have a basis for evaluating specific films: do they increase or limit human potentials? With this in mind, I want to consider not a filmmaker but a French artist, Odilon Redon (1840-1916), who shows some problems facing critics of the avant-garde. Redon's career falls into two phases: an early stags dominated by dark lithographs which express explicitly

mystic and Symbolist concerns, and a later stage, when he turned to color and spent the last years of his career mostly painting vases of flowers. Redon's later career is intriguing. His earlier work has been revived with the current re-evaluation of a strong non-Impressionist trend in late 19th century French art, generally called Symbolist (Gustave Moreau, Puvis de Chevannes, the Nabis group, etc.), but Redon's flower paintings remain little known. They combine a subject so simple and ordinary that it is a cliché with an understandable and avant-garde form. Redon accomplishes what might seem impossible: works which would be easily understood and appreciated by a mass public (you could sell reproductions in Woolworth's) and which offer formal pleasures for the highly sophisticated viewer.

The question I'd like to pose is this: are these paintings progressive or reactionary? In terms of the left utilitarian perspective, these paintings of flowers certainly do not serve the immediate or general needs of revolutionary forces. But since the left utilitarian view has been most vocally argued lately in the U.S. by various Maoist sects and individuals, I would contrast their position with Chinese practice. Specifically, from a utilitarian perspective, how does one account for Mao Tse-Tung's lyrical nature poems, or the official Chinese high regard for jade carving, a tradition deeply imbedded in the elite culture of pre-Revolutionary China? I raise these questions not as putdowns, but to point out that the utilitarian position in isolation cannot deal with many questions of art, or really decide if Redon's paintings are progressive or reactionary.

The example of Redon also poses problems for the mainstream Marxist aesthetic principle of realism. When combined with utilitarianism, as in Socialist Realism, the realist doctrine seems to answer the question: though realistic or representational, Redon's flowers do not have a social context or message. But how, within a realist perspective alone, do we account for the Soviet Union's museums filled with Russian Orthodox icons?

The answer to my initial question about the progressive or reactionary nature of Redon's flower paintings is one that points out the fallacy in asking the question in that way. It can't be answered in the abstract and outside of history. Such questions are important but must always be qualified in terms of progressive or reactionary for what audience and in what historical moment. The utilitarian argument contains a partial truth and must be rephrased. We must ask what the needs of the movement are in a more comprehensive way. We must ask in a way that recognizes art as having the potential to expand human possibilities and sees that expansion itself as progressive.

Let us return to the possibilities of a radical avant-garde film at present. Beyond the avant-garde as critique of class society or as critique of bourgeois film forms, there is another little explored and tentative possibility at this point in film history. If we accept one of cinema's functions as leisure recreation, entertainment and amusement, then an avant-garde cinema could fulfill this function in a socially and politically

progressive way without being just a negating art. For example, the nonrepresentational films of Jordan Belson and others serve as perceptual fields for the audience. Given what has happened in all the arts in the 20th century and given what we now know of the human mind, the only acceptable definition of art must start with, or come close to, Morse Peckham's idea that

“a work of art is any perceptual field which an individual uses as an occasion for performing the role of art perceiver.”

Filmic art has something to do with projected image, but that's about as far as we should go in forming a strict definition of film. Used to the 19th century version of mimetic representation, still dominant in this 20th century art, many people have difficulty in appreciating nonrepresentational film. A genuine film aesthetic must face the problem of nonrepresentational art that deliberately rejects imitation of any reality. There is, and has been, after all, instrumental music, decorative art, design, etc. Nonrepresentational art isn't new, just neglected.

While socialists have often recognized the importance and promoted the practice of nonrepresentational arts, especially in artisan work (for example, William Morris in late Victorian England), Marxism has generally not handled the subject even with minimal grace. Although Marx developed a thorough analysis of society in general, he never detailed his concepts in terms of art but more or less took over the educated German middle class aesthetic assumptions of his day. In turn Marxists have tended to fall back on utilitarian concepts or new justifications for mimesis, calling it realism, or have combined the two into Socialist Realism, or tried to place art outside of current society and ideology. We face an uncomfortable choice between this kind of Marxist aesthetic and formalist aesthetics: content for its own sake, or form for its own sake.

That is a false choice. Many of the apparent paradoxes and dilemmas of modern art disappear if we conceive of art in its social context, in its historical moment and movement, in its specific context with relation to an audience. An adequate radical film criticism must rest on this understanding. Further, it must recognize the human dimension of film art. The debates over subject matter and treatment, be they phrased in terms of realism, anti-realism, non-representation, or whatever, are sterile without a full understanding of the human creation and use of art. This understanding implies a dialectical conception of human history. With that, film criticism can be worthy of the films it criticizes.

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Women in Focus Feminist catalogue

by Patricia Erens

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WOMEN IN FOCUS by Jeanne Betancourt. Dayton, Ohio:
Pflamm, 1974. 106 pp. \$14.00 cloth; \$10.00 paper.

As the first published book devoted to women filmmakers, Jeanne Betancourt's WOMEN IN FOCUS provides both jubilation and a great disappointment. The book annotates approximately one hundred films of varying lengths by female (and a handful of male) directors. Each listing is followed by bibliographic information on the filmmaker (some gleaned from personal correspondence), a filmography, and suggestions for supplementary reading. In addition, the book contains a plethora of well chosen photographs and an especially fine annotated bibliography, compiled by Madeline Warren, of seventy works on all aspects of interest to feminists.

Unfortunately, however. WOMEN IN FOCUS is not the book we've all been waiting for. Betancourt has chosen merely to document the works of women filmmakers rather than to confront the theoretical issues which they raise, especially the question of a feminist aesthetic. Thus, WOMEN IN FOCUS reads like a cross between a well-illustrated catalogue and a recipe book. Aiming at the high school and college teacher, school librarian, and audio-visual department, Betancourt seems more intent on classifying each film in its proper category than in analyzing the works.

Betancourt, who teaches at an all-women's high school in New York City and who participated in the first International Women's Film Festival, states in her introduction that the selections reflect her desire to present works with non-sexist images. Because she used the material to encourage her students to confront their own feelings about being female, a high percentage of the films deal with sexuality as well as with social issues. Such an approach, though self involving, tends to ignore historical and theoretical problems in favor of questions of identity.

By including many films which depict women on the threshold of feminine consciousness, Betancourt avoids the problem of a limited critical stance which characterizes Joan Mellen's *WOMEN AND THEIR SEXUALITY IN THE NEW FILM*, a work which favors militancy over maternity and confidence over confusion. Although Betancourt's admiration for intelligent, independent women, capable of making resolute decisions, emerges in her review of Yolanda Du Luaart's *ANGELA DAVIS: PORTRAIT OF A REVOLUTIONARY*, she does not ignore the importance of works like Nell Cox's *A-B*, Agnes Varda's *CLEO FROM FIVE TO SEVEN*, and Julia Reichert and James Klein's *GROWING UP FEMALE*, which depict women incapable of dealing with sexist oppression or unconscious of the degree to which they have ingested the dominant values of a sexist society. It is too bad that Betancourt did not also include some problematic films like *WANDA* (see Chuck Kleinhans' review in *JUMP CUT* no. 1) or Claude Chabrol's *LES BONNES FEMMES*. By refusing to acknowledge films which depict the passive assignation of a Wanda or the fantasies of the shopgirls in *LES BONNES FEMMES*, Betancourt limits herself to a circumscribed area of the female experience.

Although Betancourt explicitly rejects the existence of a feminist aesthetic, it is regrettable that she did not develop comprehensive criteria for viewing films by and/or about women, which could then be applied to works not discussed in her book. Such an approach would have been extremely useful in coming to terms with stereotypical portrayals and with projected fantasies. By bringing together such a diverse grouping (commercial features, personal documentaries, experimental works, and educational films) which have little in common except non-sexist images, Betancourt has created a bag of worms. Some effort should have been made to deal with the various modes of expression and the conventions intrinsic to each genre. Betancourt squirms out of an uncomfortable predicament by treating each film as a closed work. She states,

“As I reflected on how I wrote the reviews, however, I realized that each was an entity in itself, a reaction to an individual work. I can't place these films, as diverse as they are, into a critical mold or format.”

Such an attitude undermines the value of the work as a useful tool for teachers unfamiliar with film studies and for film scholars. As a collection of impressionistic reviews, the book will date quickly (hopefully, each year more women will produce films) and thus will become little more than an outmoded catalogue. It is too bad that Betancourt did not tie the films together in a more meaningful way.

In an effort to establish some consistency, Betancourt devised a general format. Each entry includes the following material: 1) plot summary and pertinent production facts, 2) critical assessment, primarily in feminist terms, and 3) appropriate use of the film. However, such an approach becomes ludicrous when applied to the experiments of Maya Deren. In

discussing MESHES OF THE AFTERNOON, Betancourt wisely chose to deal with film aesthetics. Her perceptive analysis, however, has little relationship to feminist concerns. Perhaps noting this defect, Betancourt attempted to apply a feminist critique in her analysis of Deren's RITUAL IN TRANSFIGURED TIME. But her conclusion that the film concerns a heroine "searching for a love" is not only grossly simplistic, but worse, such an interpretation undermines the multiple readings inherent in so complex a work. Other absurdities include the suggested reading of The Boston Women's Health Book Collective's *Our Bodies, Our Selves* for a discussion of Kirsanov's MENILMONTANT. To approach the poetic beauty of such an avant-garde masterpiece from the perspective of biology and endocrinology seems the height of folly.

Several last comments. Betancourt has included many directors whose names are not as familiar as those of Nelly Kaplan, Agnes Varda, and Mai Zetterling. Of particular interest are animators like Suzan Pitt Kraning and Suzanne Bauman and women who earn their living as producer/ directors in television and nontheatrical productions, such as Nell Cox, Frances McLaughlin Gill, and Martha Stuart. Also, although WOMEN IN FOCUS is largely devoted to works by women, the inclusion of several excellent films by men deserves praise. Certainly Abram Room's BED AND SOFA, Ousmane Sembene's BLACK GIRL, Jean Louis Bertucelli's RAMPARTS OF CLAY, and Herbert Biberman's SALT OF THE EARTH need to be considered, especially alongside works by Hollywood directors covered in the texts by Marjorie Rosen and Molly Haskell.

Despite the flaws, WOMEN IN FOCUS is a welcome addition to the growing library of works devoted to women and film. It is unfortunate that the outrageous price of \$10.00 (paper) will prevent many prospective purchasers from adding the book to their collection.

The last word Marxist film criticism

by the Editors

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With this issue JUMP CUT completes its first year of publication. Since anniversaries are times for looking ahead, we'd like to indicate some of the areas we want to examine in the next year and beyond. We announced in our first editorial that JUMP CUT was committed to examining film in "its social and political context." In other editorials we indicated some of our basic areas of interest, and why we believe they are important: Hollywood (JUMP CUT 2), independent political filmmaking (JUMP CUT 3), and structuralism and semiology as important critical methodologies with Marxism as a basic foundation (JUMP CUT 4) To further our project of developing radical film criticism, we expect to present major articles in the coming year in the following areas.

THE INSTITUTIONAL NATURE OF FILM IN SOCIETY. The vast bulk of film discussion goes on without recognizing the film industry as industry, as show business. In part, this omission derives from the artificial split bourgeois education and criticism makes between aesthetics and the social, economic, and political context in which art is created. But film always comes to us from and is heavily influenced by, even if not obviously determined by, the commercial and institutional structures that produce it. This ranges from film financing and production, marketing, distribution and exhibition, to censorship and self-censorship. The institutions involved range from international conglomerate corporations to small commercial labs, from the American Film Institute to local film clubs. How those institutions influence the films we see and how we see and discuss them needs to be thoroughly examined.

RADICAL CULTURAL AND AESTHETIC ANALYSES. The examination and discussion of film and its relation to aesthetics demands a sophisticated analysis based on the Marxist conception of culture, society, and history. There has been an explosion of knowledge, theories, and discussion of this problem, particularly in Europe in an

atmosphere of vigorous controversy. We want to distill from these insights—into the functioning of bourgeois culture and into the possibilities for an activist intervention in that culture—those theories and analyses which will help people in the United States come to a better understanding of film art, culture, and society, and ways of changing all three. Such a project must include an integral understanding of U.S. struggles in the last decade against capitalism, sexism, racism, and imperialism.

This effort is clearly interdisciplinary and needs contributions from all kinds of cultural workers: filmmakers, film critics and scholars, political economists, popular culture students, cultural historians, anthropologists, and many others. We hope and intend that our reviews, articles, dialogues, editorials, notes, and even exchange ads will make JUMP CUT a medium of fruitful exchange for radical cultural workers. We want to bridge the usual gaps between filmmakers and critics, between critics and scholars, between academics and other cultural workers, between film people and other students of culture and society. Equally we see the need for a close mutual relation between cultural workers and the struggles for liberation of workers, women, gays and lesbians, oppressed racial and ethnic groups, and anti-imperialist forces throughout the world.

FILM AND IDEOLOGY. One of the central problems we are concentrating on is the complex notion of ideology. We are, as Marx said, dominated by ideas which bear no accurate relation to the reality we live, It is in the interest of those few who profit from the status quo to mystify our awareness, to keep people ignorant of the real relations which exist in our society, to keep power from people. Film functions, most of the time, to maintain the current social order. Thus the task of radical cultural workers is to raise consciousness, to provide the intellectual tools for struggle against all forms of exploitation and oppression.

Unlike the majority of film periodicals, JUMP CUT is not devoted to publishing the conventional “best” of what is being written about film, for we are committed to challenging and changing the way things are. Nor are we interested in building circulation with artificial controversy and superficial ideas and modish writing styles. We think the quality of JUMP CUT and its liveliness has come and will come from an active engagement with the crucial issues and ideas raised by film in our time. JUMP CUT has been and will be a work-in-progress, a process, a project, aimed at developing an active radical film criticism.